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Insurgency, Amnesty, and Dictatorship:  
General Rojas Pinilla's Attempts to End  
Colombia's Violencia, 1953-1957.

by

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The University of Texas at Austin

SUPERVISOR: Jonathan Brown

General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla assumed the presidency of Colombia in a bloodless, 1953 coup. He inherited a bitterly-divided nation in the midst of an outbreak of spontaneous rural fighting known as *La Violencia*. This thesis concerns the efforts of the Rojas government to bring an end to *La Violencia* through both peaceful and military means. The major themes of the paper are the causes of social violence, government counterinsurgency policy, Colombian politics of the 1940s and 1950s, and U.S. military aid during the Cold War.

This thesis pays particular attention to the role of the Colombian armed forces and national police. Rojas' unique position as an (initially) popular dictator and his varied attempts to retain power frequently involved military uses and abuses. The role of the United States in Rojas' government will also receive considerable attention since U.S. arms and diplomats vied for influence in Colombia's government. Finally the paper attempts to draw conclusions about the unfolding of Colombian political history and more general lessons on social violence and political insurgency.

Insurgency, Amnesty, and Dictatorship:  
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Colombia's Violencia, 1953-1957

by

Daryl Ryan Maas, B.S.

Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
Of the University of Texas at Austin  
in Partial Fulfillment  
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for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

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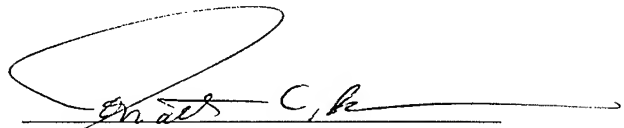
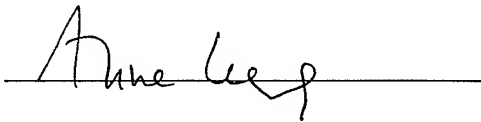
Insurgency, Amnesty, and Dictatorship:

General Rojas Pinilla's Attempts to End

Colombia's Violencia, 1953-1955

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To Christianna, for trying.

## VITA

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All men are like grass,  
and their glory is like the glory of the field;  
the grass withers and the flowers fall,  
but the word of the Lord stands forever.

1 Peter 1:24-25

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This thesis pays particular attention to the role of the Colombian armed forces and national police. Rojas' unique position as an (initially) popular dictator and his varied attempts to retain power frequently involved military uses and abuses. The role of the United States in Rojas' government will also receive considerable attention since U.S. arms and diplomats vied for influence in Colombia's government. Finally the paper attempts to draw conclusions about the unfolding of Colombian political history and more general lessons on social violence and political insurgency.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
<b>Chapter One:</b> Background: Political Violence in Colombia to 1953 .....	7
<b>Chapter Two:</b> Rojas the Conciliator: Peaceful Solutions to <i>La Violencia</i> .....	25
<b>Chapter Three:</b> Rojas the General: Military Solutions to <i>La Violencia</i> .....	45
<b>Chapter Four:</b> Rojas, the United States, and Colombian Politics .....	76
<b>Chapter Five:</b> Conclusion .....	111
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	121
<b>Vita</b> .....	126

## INTRODUCTION

The 1953 ascension of General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla to the presidency of Colombia created the first and only military dictatorship to control the government since the 1821 founding of the Republic. The desperate years leading up to Rojas' accession had called for desperate measures. Five years of rural violence had caused tens of thousands of deaths, and threatened the national government with collapse. General Rojas entered office with a mandate to end the violence immediately. His failure to do so represented a significant missed opportunity for Colombia and condemned the nation to additional years of strife.

Rojas Pinilla initially generated great popular enthusiasm due to his non-partisan character. His presidency instantly legitimized a government torn by partisan strife. Both major political parties backed the new regime, offering great promise for an end to the violence. Guerrillas loyal to the Liberal Party who had previously distrusted the army (under Conservative Party control) now came forward to negotiate with the military. Armed with military power, political authority, and popular legitimacy, Rojas appeared capable of ending *La Violencia* and restoring democratic government to Colombia. Nonetheless, his regime failed to bring about



peace and in fact deepened guerrilla resistance in some areas. What factors prevented General Rojas from bringing peaceful, democratic rule to the country? What unique elements did Rojas bring to the problem of *La Violencia* and what does his rule tell us about Colombia and armed insurgency in general?

To fulfill its mandate, the Rojas government needed to eliminate the rampant violence throughout the countryside and peacefully return the government to civilian control. Three different obstacles, combined with corresponding mistakes by Rojas, prevented the realization of these goals. First, Rojas' failure to follow through on an otherwise successful amnesty disillusioned many guerrillas who had previously been willing to cooperate with his regime. Secondly, the ideological commitment of a minority of the guerrilla groups prevented an easy surrender while Rojas' own suspicious inaction permitted their continued resistance. Finally, Rojas' personal desire to perpetuate his stay in office caused needless conflict with the traditionally dominant Colombian social groups and with the United States, ultimately undermining both domestic and international support for his regime and forcing a *coup d'etat*.

The principle areas of analysis for the study of Rojas' attempts to end *La Violencia* will be the legitimacy of the government and the character of the insurgency. The personality of Rojas dominated Colombian government for much of the time period studied. Nevertheless, the steady erosion of his support among the political parties, landowners, and the Catholic Church gradually limited Rojas' freedom of action. Furthermore, Rojas' dependence on the United States military as

the supplier of arms to the all-important Colombian Army brought him into conflict with the U.S. State Department, which disapproved of Rojas' internal policies.

As for the insurgency, the guerrillas responded primarily to two major stimuli. First of all, they arose and persevered as a result of rampant violence in the countryside. The widespread bloodshed of *La Violencia* greatly exceeded that of previous internal Colombian fighting, and thus it produced a new and unique problem: the spontaneous creation of guerrilla cells. The second determinant of guerrilla activity was government policy. The actions of Rojas' presidential predecessors largely shaped the *Violencia* that he faced. The thesis will first analyze the breakdown of order in the countryside that created the original armed insurgencies. Secondly, it will analyze the impact of government policy in either pacifying the insurgents or deepening their resolve to resist. Rojas' government employed a unique mixture of military repression and broad amnesty in a unique system for resolving civil dispute. Rojas, a president whose rise to power and continued rule he owed to the military, adopted not a militaristic policy, but nonetheless one centered on the military. This more creative use of military power retained the legitimacy of the government and its army during years when few national institutions carried any weight with the public at large.

This thesis concentrates on the events of the years 1948 to 1957. Chapter one provides a brief background of *La Violencia*, its sources, and its nature. The chapter will begin with a narrative of traditional violence in Colombian politics and the bitter partisan nature of rural communities. The second half of the essay will concentrate

on the character of the first guerrillas who took to the countryside in the 1940s, and the means the government employed to eliminate them. The loss of political control over the guerrillas and the subsequent transformation of *La Violencia* are the themes of the introductory chapter.

In chapter two, we analyze the ascension of General Rojas Pinilla to the presidency and the unique factors that enabled him successfully to offer amnesty. The actual mechanics of the amnesty receive attention, but the focus will be on shortcomings in the Rojas regime that upset an otherwise successful peace. The chapter ends with a discussion of amnesty as a solution to civil violence.

Whereas chapter two addressed peaceful solutions to the insurgency, chapter three deals with military efforts against the guerrillas. The timing and methods of Rojas' military counterinsurgency reveal much about his goals and personality. His political reliance on the military (and not a political party) colored all his actions and sometimes interfered with sound policy. Also, the failure of Rojas to terminate the insurgency led to a further loss of government legitimacy and a hardening in the nature of insurgent violence.

Chapter four analyzes Rojas' relationship with the United States. As a military dictator, he looked to the U.S. government for weapons, training, and certification as an ally against Communism. The presence of a Colombian battalion fighting with UN forces in the Korean War exercised considerable influence during aid negotiations. Rojas' need for weapons, combined with his general apathy toward

international opinion, tell us much about the structure of and pressures on his government.

The chapters will exhibit considerable chronological overlap. The first covers, the longest time period as it attempts to characterize the history of partisan conflict in Colombia from its founding as a nation up to 1946. This chapter presents some of the political events leading directly into *La Violencia*, but later chapters will expand on these events to illustrate individual themes. Against this background, chapter two introduces Rojas and his celebrated amnesty of 1953. To treat the amnesty in proper context, the chapter draws in years on both sides of the actual event, including the entire Rojas era of 1953-1957. The chapter will not expose the Rojas counterinsurgency strategy in its entirety, and instead presents the amnesty, in all its uniqueness, for an individual case study. The following chapters will wrap the amnesty into the larger plan Rojas implemented to resolve the *Violencia*. Chapter three will cover the same years as the preceding chapter, but will more directly address military institutions and operations in an attempt to describe the complexity of the public order problem facing Rojas. This chapter presents the amnesty in its role within Rojas' larger strategy to end the civil war. Finally, the fourth chapter on U.S. aid focuses on American aid to Rojas, but summarizes U.S. policy over the previous decade as well. Here, the primacy of domestic issues and Rojas' growing concern for personal security become evident even as his counterinsurgency plan begins to unravel.

In addition to a comprehensive collection of secondary sources on Colombia and *La Violencia*, the thesis will make use of several broad groups of primary sources. To begin with, the Bogotá daily newspaper *El Tiempo* will provide Colombian news and analysis. A Liberal newspaper, *El Tiempo* was attacked by rioters during the Presidency of Laureano Gómez, intermittently censored, and shut down late during Rojas' tenure. Always at the center of domestic Colombian discourse, *El Tiempo* contains superb editorials by leading political leaders during the period 1953-1955. The news reporting is usually limited to government bulletins, but is accurate, if politically nuanced. *El Tiempo* also provides many official government statements that present Rojas' domestic policy and public relations strategy. The records of the U.S. State Department show the foreign policy goals of Rojas and also provide personal evaluations by U.S. diplomats. Selections from the National Security File give American analysis into political and economic conditions in Colombia. Various U.S. Army studies of *La Violencia*, especially one conducted in the 1960's by the Special Operations Research Office, give insight into the tactics of the guerrilla war itself. Finally, excerpts from personal correspondence and autobiographies of various guerrillas can be obtained indirectly through existing works.

## CHAPTER ONE

### BACKGROUND: POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN COLOMBIA TO 1953

Political strife has been a fixture of Colombian life since 1826, only five years after the founding of the nation in 1821. Partisan animosity arose as early as the rivalry between founder Simón Bolívar and his lieutenant, Francisco de Paula Santander. Bolívar sought the support of traditional structures such as the Catholic Church and the military in establishing his rule. In opposition to Bolívar, Santander saw the Church as an enemy of advancement and a purveyor of superstition.<sup>1</sup> He believed that Church control of education presented an obstacle to his progressive vision for the nation. Santander envisioned an activist role for government and a strong central state that could promote development. Bolívar used the Church and military (both of which controlled the loyalties of many Indians and peasants) to resist Santander's plans for the government. The bitter ideological struggle between

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<sup>1</sup> David Bushnell, The Making of Modern Colombia. A Nation in Spite of Itself, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 56, 70-71.

Bolívar and Santander eventually solidified in the form of the Conservative and Liberal political parties.

The national parties established early in the country's history would have to compete with a highly decentralized nation that responded little to Bogotá's leadership. A major contributor to Colombia's traditional regionalism is the nation's marked division by geographic barriers. Most prominently, three major mountain ranges run parallel north to south across the entire country. Deep valleys between these three *cordilleras* contain many of Colombia's towns and farms, yet Bogotá and other major cities rest high in the mountain ranges. In addition, the unpopulated, eastern plains (*llanos*) make up half of the nation's land area. Travel between the various parts of Colombia is slow and difficult. The *llanos* lack significant transportation infrastructure and rely principally upon the river travel. The western mountains and valleys possess roads and railroads, but often through difficult terrain. In addition, the extreme altitudes of the passes between Colombia's three major valleys degrade the capacity of whatever combustion-driven vehicles do exist. Altitude differences also lead to extreme variability in climates across the nation. Racial backgrounds also vary to a great across the geography of the nation. Descendents of the Spanish populate the prosperous Caribbean coastline to the north. In the southwest of the country, a strong African influence and poorer, agricultural living dominate. The mountains of Colombia vary from non-hispanicized tribal groups to *mestizo* urban populations.

In sum, Colombians from different areas frequently have little in common with each other and develop strong regional identities.<sup>2</sup> Regionalism tends to dominate political life. Therefore, transfers of national power result in a shift in top-down control of a given region, but little change in local resistance to federal power. The ensuing and often violent reaction can be difficult to control from afar, in Bogotá.<sup>3</sup> Colombian governments of the nineteenth century typically had poor tax revenues and small armies, further complicating the task of controlling the disparate provinces.<sup>4</sup> The early struggles over the identity of the Colombian nation would be greatly shaped by regionalism and the weakness of the Bogotá government.

The nineteenth century experienced a prolonged seesaw of power between Conservative and Liberal parties in Colombia. Many of Santander's (and later, the Liberal Party's) first and most consistent actions came in the form of attacks against the Church, since it served as a Conservative power base. Santander established public schools which he funded through the expropriation of the land of smaller Church missions. Many of these missions had previously run their own schools. In addition, the new republic claimed the right of *patronato*, to appoint priests to important positions. Santander initially took up the *patronato* without requesting or receiving permission from the Pope.<sup>5</sup> Very quickly, many rural bishops

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<sup>2</sup> Malcolm Deas, "Venezuela, Colombia, and Ecuador: the First Half-Century of Independence," in Cambridge History of Latin America, Vol 3, edited by Leslie Bethel, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 514-516.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 525-526.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 518-520.

<sup>5</sup> Santander later requested and received permission. Bushnell, The Making of Modern Colombia 56.



became the enemy of Santander's progressive reforms and came to view liberalism as a threat.<sup>6</sup> Forced into reliance upon the Conservative Party for their defense, large parts of the Colombian Catholic Church rapidly converted into partisan organs. When threatened with the dissolution of their schools and monasteries, rural priests demonized the opposition, even calling for violence in the intense political struggle.<sup>7</sup> The politicization of the church caused a sharply divided population based on party loyalties.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the squabbles over the preamble to the Colombian Constitution best illustrate the symbolic struggle for control over the nation. Much like two children who repeatedly smash the other's sandcastle when each others' backs are turned, the wording of the preamble was changed to reflect whichever political party held power. When the Conservatives took over in 1843, for example, they changed the wording from the deistic "In the name of God, Author and Supreme Legislator of the Universe" to the more orthodox "In the name of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."<sup>9</sup>

Violence frequently marked transfers of political power in nineteenth century Colombia, and suppression of the minority party always followed.<sup>10</sup> When

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<sup>6</sup> Deas, "The First Half-Century," 517, 524.

<sup>7</sup> Bushnell, Making of Modern Colombia, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Levine's remarks are not specific to this time period, but his general observations (as a Colombia expert) on the politicization of the Church and its effects on authority are germane. Daniel H. Levine, Religion and Politics in Latin America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 142-144.

<sup>9</sup> Bushnell, The Making of Modern Colombia, 95.

<sup>10</sup> Transfers of power in Colombia have always (with one exception) come about through elections, however tainted by intimidation, violence, and corruption. Lest the reader think that

Conservatives gained control of the government in 1885, Liberals rejected the corrupt election results and, after some delaying compromises, the country entered the War of a Thousand Days (1899-1902). Although titled a war, this conflict offered few battles or campaigns. Peasants carried out most of the killing against their own neighbors and rivals. "Constant" and "endemic" are the words that historians most frequently evoke to describe this sort of civil violence.<sup>11</sup>

The Conservatives won the War of the Thousand Days (in one of the few formal campaigns) and ruled the country until 1930. In defeat, however, the Liberals exacted some influence and avoided persecution by their willingness to fight. The War of the Thousand Days, the longest of Colombia's civil wars in the century, claimed 100,000 lives and best demonstrates the decentralized violence (nonetheless set off by national elections) inherent in Colombian politics. The minority party, ignored or even repressed by the ruling government, turned to violence as its only means of gaining recognition. Peasants in the countryside nearly always carried out the violence while national party leaders used the unrest to extract concessions from the government in power. Colombian historian Gonzalo Sánchez has remarked that during their time in the minority, Liberals "had shown contradictory tendencies whose extreme manifestations ranged from a permanent reconciliation with the adversary to the proclamation of armed insurrection as the only tactic for coming to

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Conservatives were alone in their repression of political minorities, the Liberals practiced much the same tactics. After assuming power in 1930, the Liberal governments set about repressing Conservative voters and settling old scores built up during the years of Conservative governance.

power.”<sup>12</sup> In the nineteenth century, ruling Bogotá governments rarely had the power to enforce their will over the entire country and frequently had to come to some sort of accommodation with the elite of the (resisting) minority party.<sup>13</sup>

Rather than a simple struggle over political objectives, most of the action in the War of the Thousand Days took the form of spontaneous and ruthless violence without direct military objectives. Years earlier, a U.S. chargé in Colombia had remarked that “their quarrels and revolutions are like family quarrels—as frivolous, often, in their inception, and as fierce and unforgiving in their prosecution.”<sup>14</sup> While this quotation invokes no small degree of individual perception, Colombian political violence would possess these same characteristics for decades to come. Nonetheless, the War of the Thousand Days ended when the elites reached a consensus as to who would control the government and under what circumstances. As in all the wars of the nineteenth century, the elites maintained control over their constituents and proved capable of enforcing peace through elite compromise. The loss of this elite consensus would define later *Violencia* of the twentieth century, and foil even Rojas’ attempts to quell it.

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<sup>11</sup> David Bushnell, “Politics and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Colombia” in *Violence in Colombia. The Contemporary Crisis in Historical Perspective* Edited By Charles Bergquist, Ricardo Peñaranda, and Gonzalo Sánchez. (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1992), 13-15.

<sup>12</sup> Gonzalo Sánchez and Donny Meertens, *Bandits, Peasants, and Politics. The Case of “La Violencia” in Colombia* translated by Alan Hynds, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 10.

<sup>13</sup> Deas, “The First Half-Century,” 521-522.

<sup>14</sup> Lars Schoultz, *Beneath the United States: A History of US Policy Toward Latin America*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 165.

In 1930, the Liberals took power in national elections and reversed the fortunes of oppressor and oppressed. Government oppression of Conservatives and considerable peasant violence grew rapidly through 1931. In fact, many historians claim that the escalating government violence could have led to civil war if a 1932 war with Peru had not unified the population (a rare event) and redirected state actions.<sup>15</sup> In any event, the legitimization of armed violence for political ends endured and grew into a destructive trend in Colombian social life.

The 1930 transfer of power to the Liberal Party aroused new forces within Colombian politics. Long excluded by the Conservative Party (whose benefactors tended to be landowners, the Catholic Church, and select rural communities), many urban workers saw the possibility for political reform. In addition, landless peasants hoped for a more activist government that would break the elite monopoly on rural land ownership. From 1934 to 1938, President Alfonso López Pumarejo trumpeted his “Revolution on the March” as the future of Colombian politics. In 1936, the passage of pro-tenant land legislation in the form of Law 200 sparked hopes of further land reform.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, the elite segments of the Liberal Party in Congress exercised control over López Pumarejo and moderated or deferred his more radical proposals. López resigned the Presidency out of discouragement before completing his second term.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> James M. Daniel, Rural Violence in Colombia Since 1946, (Washington: Special Operations Research Office, 1965), 27.

<sup>16</sup> Sánchez, Bandits, Peasants, and Politics, 11.

<sup>17</sup> Vernon Lee Fluharty, Dance of the Millions. Military Rule and the Social Revolution in Colombia, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1957), 44-46.

The greatest manifestation of popular hopes for an activist government came in the form of a young Liberal congressman named Jorge Eliécer Gaitán. A man of *mestizo* background, Gaitán immediately stood apart from the rest of the white Bogotá elite. Although racial power divisions in Colombia are not as pronounced as some portions of Latin America, Gaitán's ethnicity gave him common ground with the majority, mixed-blood population. Gaitán gained national attention when he led congressional debates on the status of the United Fruit Company. United Fruit was under investigation for its role in the infamous 1928 banana zone massacre. Gaitán's exposure of violence and corruption practiced by United Fruit and its allies in the government forced the resignation of the Minister of War and significant reform of regulation of foreign employers.<sup>18</sup> By attacking United Fruit in the public arena, Gaitán quickly gained the reputation of an ally and spokesman for the cause of Colombian workers. During the 1920's and 1930's, Gaitán had been part of a movement to create a third, workers party.<sup>19</sup> Both major parties, however, consistently united to squelch attempts at breaking their monopoly on power. In 1945, the government banned urban protests, dismantled labor unions, and generally frustrated the cause of lower-class activism. In the 1946 presidential election, Gaitán ran as a Liberal against the official candidate of his party—openly challenging the elite control. The hopes of many frustrated and disaffected Colombians rode with Gaitán.

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<sup>18</sup> Fluharty, Dance of the Millions, 39.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

The civil war period of Colombian history known as *La Violencia* began on August 7, 1946, when the aforementioned split Liberal vote enabled the minority Conservative Party to win the presidency after sixteen years of Liberal rule. The frustrated political environment soon became filled with invective and rivalry, both between and within the parties. Violence in the countryside, a pattern for years prior, increased along political lines.

In addition to simple party competition, however, genuine class bitterness soon arose. Gaitán and his followers engaged in public confrontations with the Liberal Party leadership and accused the party of betraying the people. The Liberal Party forced Gaitán out of nearly all official party positions, while the Conservative Party worked to discredit him and benefited from Liberal division. Nonetheless, Gaitán maintained considerable support from the working classes of Colombia, many of whom felt the two dominant parties represented an oligarchy, unresponsive to the interests of the country at large. Active in 1948, Gaitán began gathering support for an election bid in 1950. He led large, public rallies and marches in opposition to the “oligarchy,” frightening the major parties with both his voracity and popularity.<sup>20</sup> Gaitán’s popular momentum became so great that he eventually gained the begrudging support of his party as the Liberal nominee for the 1950 election. On the

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<sup>20</sup> As if his *mestizo* background and popular support weren’t enough, Gaitán further upset the establishment politicians with his favorite podium cry of “CHARGE!” Gonzalo Sánchez, “The Violence, An Interpretative Synthesis,” in *Violence in Colombia. The Contemporary Crisis in Historical Perspective*, Edited By Charles Bergquist, Ricardo Peñaranda, and Gonzalo Sánchez, (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1992), 80-82.

9<sup>th</sup> of April, 1948, an unidentified gunman shot Gaitán as he left his office for lunch.<sup>21</sup> Thousands of Liberals believed that defenders of the “oligarchy” had sabotaged their hopes for progressive reform. Most historians agree that neither political party planned the assassination of Gaitán, yet both sides accused the other of inciting and sustaining the violence that followed.<sup>22</sup> After resisting the urge to rise up after the 1946 election and repeatedly postponing violent protest, Gaitán’s supporters exploded with rage following his assassination.<sup>23</sup>

News of the assassination spread across the city within hours. The students and laborers of Bogotá (already experiencing a frustrating economic depression) rose up in fury. With no obvious enemy and no one to blame (although most initially blamed the Conservatives), the crowds manifested their fury in a week of mass riots known as the *Bogotazo*. Rioters destroyed the downtown section of Bogotá in an orgy of looting and burning. Mobs burned down all symbols of Conservative power, including the major Conservative newspaper, numerous Catholic Churches, and the house of Conservative Party chairman Laureano Gómez.<sup>24</sup> A mob even attempted to assault the presidential palace. Government troops moved in to restore order only

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<sup>21</sup> Crowds beat to death Gaitán’s assassin at the site of the murder before his identity or motivations could be determined.

<sup>22</sup> All sorts of theories exist with regard to the identity of Gaitán’s assassins. Communists are among the favorite culprits—a theory further aided by the coincidental presence of Fidel Castro in Bogotá. Gaitán’s numerous enemies and the violent nature of Colombian political life preclude all conclusive investigation of the matter, although the strongest is probably that against the communists. Bushnell, *The Making of Modern Colombia*, 202-204, see especially Fluharty, *Dance of the Millions*, 101-103.

<sup>23</sup> To give full credit to the cited author and to the 1946 forbearance of Gaitán, one must quote Fluharty’s observation that after the 1946 elections “The people awaited Gaitán’s word to touch off the violence. He withheld it. Instead, he called for order and promised a return to the fight [election] in 1950.” Fluharty, *Dance of the Millions*, 83.

after a lack of food and shelter had dispersed the mobs. The violence spread to the countryside where rival groups took up arms to murder political opponents.<sup>25</sup>

Whether out of paranoia or vendetta, death squads attacked even the most insignificant villages and killed for various, unpredictable reasons. Peasants attacked their neighbors for being a Liberal, or a Conservative, or a Protestant, a Judge, a Mayor, rich, foreign-born, or any other characteristic that threatened or offended.<sup>26</sup> The total breakdown of state authority in rural areas created a subculture of violence that quickly self-propagated.

The widespread outbreak of slaughter went far beyond the Colombian government's control. Liberal rioters held several towns for as long as a month before the army could retake them.<sup>27</sup> Combined casualties rose to more than a thousand per month, nearly all of them killed by other civilians. Even after the cities came under government control, the countryside remained in uproar. Longstanding political opponents (as was the pattern even from the turn-of-the-century War of a Thousand Days) gave full vent to their hatreds. In addition, many of Gaitán's ideological followers professed a strong anti-oligarchicalism. As a result, they paid no attention to appeals for peace originating from the national Liberal Party.

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<sup>24</sup> Fluharty, *Dance of the Millions*, 100.

<sup>25</sup> Bushnell, *The Making of Modern Colombia*, 206.

<sup>26</sup> Colombian ambassador to the United States Urrutia Holgiun documented the tremendous control that rural clergy exerted over local (Conservative) peasants when he confessed that "...in the outlying districts of the country the clergy practically rule the actions of the people, and the clergy are ignorant. Most of the country priests have no better education than a fifth-grade pupil in the United States... They can get the peasants and police in their parishes to testify to almost anything they say." Numerous sources document clergy inciting the peasants to violence. Memorandum of a Conversation, Department of State, 30 March 1956, *FRUS* 1955-1957, vol. 7 p. 897.



Whatever the political origins of *La Violencia*, the political classes quickly lost their ability to contain it. By the time *La Violencia* finally ended in 1964, at least 200,000 Colombians had perished.<sup>28</sup>

While the opening months of *La Violencia* deserve pages of description, it is important here to document specific events that had profound effects on first, the nature of the government, and second, the nature of the violence. To begin with, the *Bogotazo* had a profound effect on the structures and mindset of the Conservative national government. Government buildings and the residences of several Conservative leaders had been burned during the rioting. Furthermore, the (largely Liberal) Bogotá police force deserted the government in its hour of need. Many joined the rioters and even fought against the army troops seeking to restore order. A downtown Bogotá police station was one of the last holdouts of rioters.<sup>29</sup> Deep distrust for Liberals, even elite Liberals who had formerly colluded with elite Conservatives, now reigned in the government. In the weeks and months that followed the *Bogotazo*, Liberal cabinet members and regional governors resigned and were replaced by staunch Conservatives.<sup>30</sup> Peasants in the countryside echoed on a more violent scale the increasing partisan division in government. Furthermore, without any opposition leaders in the cabinet or governorships, the nation had few tools to reconcile with the many Liberals now fighting in rural areas.

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<sup>27</sup> Fluharty, *Dance of the Millions*, 108.

<sup>28</sup> Amnesty International "Colombia: Political Violence. Myth and Reality," (New York: Amnesty International Publications, 1994), 14.

<sup>29</sup> Daniel, *Rural Violence in Colombia*, 42.

<sup>30</sup> Fluharty, *Dance of the Millions*, 108-110.

Another direct result of the *Bogotazo* and subsequent Conservative reaction was the politicization of the police and army. The Conservative Party historically opposed the expansion of the federal government and hence the expansion of the military. During the strong Conservative governments of 1911-1929, politicians cut the budget for the armed forces from thirty percent to eight percent of total spending.<sup>31</sup> In the aftermath of the rioting, many Liberal policemen fled to the countryside.<sup>32</sup> Men chosen specifically for loyalty to the Conservative Party filled most of these vacated positions.<sup>33</sup> Such a quick turnover rapidly politicized the police force. The Colombian Army, historically an apolitical organ, took longer to transform. Nonetheless, the eventual exit of nearly all Liberals from the government made such a result inevitable.

The final reaction of the government to the *Bogotazo* was to eye the Colombian press with suspicion. Partisan newspapers on both sides whipped up tremendous fervor in the period between the 1946 election and the riots of 1948. During the *Bogotazo*, Liberal radio stations helped to coordinate the uprising and broadcast instructions on constructing weapons.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, Liberal newspaper expressed support for the newly formed guerrilla bands in the countryside. Confronted with so many reasons to suspect and fear the press, Conservative government viewed the media as its enemy for the remainder of the *Violencia*.

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<sup>31</sup> Bushnell, *Making of Modern Colombia*, 163-167.

<sup>32</sup> These policemen probably provided the initial supply of weapons to rural guerrillas. Daniel, *Rural Violence*, 42-43.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

The *Bogotazo* also set the stage for the nature of the violence Colombia would experience in the years to come. Although the violence began along partisan lines, it quickly became anti-government in nature. Those Liberals remaining in the Colombian government had typically opposed Gaitán and his policies. After the *Bogotazo*, these leaders appealed to Liberal guerrillas to return from hiding in the countryside. Already at odds with the mainstream Liberal leadership, the guerrillas lost confidence in the national Liberal Party as *La Violencia* continued. Furthermore, the election of archconservative Laureano Gómez assured Liberal guerrillas that the government was their enemy.<sup>35</sup> Finally, crowds in the *Bogotazo* released six thousand prisoners, not including those released in other cities and towns.<sup>36</sup> The presence of a substantial criminal element in the insurgent groups ensured that cooperation with the government would not be a high priority for guerrillas in the years to come.

A second characteristic of the violence spreading throughout Colombia was the rural nature of the phenomenon. *La Violencia* would rapidly become a battle of peasants and later, rural guerrillas. So spontaneous was the violence and so directionless were its aims that historians have difficulty explaining the early formation of guerrilla bands. Historians and anthropologists have expended tremendous effort to identify social or political unity within the guerrilla movement.

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<sup>35</sup> Nearly fascist in his public statements, Gómez fled Colombia in the aftermath of Gaitán's assassination, but returned on 24 June 1949 to take control of the government. Fluharty, *Dance of the Millions*, 112.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

A myriad of political expressions and different levels of group consciousness emerged, but these tended to greatly between regions.<sup>37</sup> While land reformers, disaffected peasants, and proponents of increased democracy all fought in *La Violencia*, such issues can hardly be defined as neither the cause nor the goal for insurgent struggle.<sup>38</sup> Still, about the guerrilla nuclei that arose from the violence, we can draw two common characteristics. First, the groups possessed political homogeneity, drawn as they were from groups suffering persecution for membership in a given ideological or social group.<sup>39</sup> Secondly, the guerrillas formed in unpopulated regions near Venezuela, where the federal government exercised a minimum level of power. By 1952, approximately 20,000 guerrillas occupied the *llanos orientales*.<sup>40</sup>

The personality of Laureano Gómez divided even political moderates, removing any common ground for negotiating an end to the struggle. Fearing that the Liberal Party, benefiting from public sympathy, might win the 1950 election, Laureano Gómez blatantly took advantage of the rural violence. Even though he was not President at the time, Gómez exercised life and death power over many Liberal communities. All peasants had to fear for their lives during *La Violencia*, but Gómez

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<sup>37</sup> Sánchez, *Bandits, Peasants, and Politics*, 18-19.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>39</sup> For contemporary commentary on the formation of the guerrilla band and the effects of violence upon small group cohesion, see Camilo Torres, "Social Change and Rural Violence in Colombia" in *Revolutionary Priest: the Complete Writings and Messages of Camilo Torres*, edited by John Gerassi, (New York: Random House, 1971), 209.

<sup>40</sup> Sánchez, *Bandits, Peasants, and Politics*, 17.

intentionally gave the impression that both soldiers and civilians could act with impunity against Liberals.

In a political environment dominated by such rampant violence, a free Congress could not long endure. After numerous shout-downs and even fistfights, a gunfight broke out in Congress on the eighth of September 1949. Congressmen of both parties fired over one hundred rounds and mortally wounded one legislator.<sup>41</sup> Clearly, these men would not be the body to lead Colombia back to peace.

The eventual dominance of government troops in the *Bogotazo* ensured that *La Violencia* would not be an urban affair. Government power, without exception, controlled the major cities of Colombia. Most Liberal guerrillas fled to the sparsely-populated eastern plains region known as the *llanos orientales*. Furthermore, the spontaneous attacks that characterized *La Violencia* nearly always occurred in small villages with little connection to the centralized government. Although much of this paper will address government repression and state violence, the endemic violence of the period sprung from civilians. Colombia's harsh geography so divided the various regions that the hatreds of local motivations (political, economic, or even emotional in nature) served as the initial stimulus for rural violence.<sup>42</sup> The best estimates put at 200,000 the number of Colombians killed in the 1948-1964 *Violencia*. The

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<sup>41</sup> Fluharty, *Dance of the Millions*, 112.

<sup>42</sup> Sánchez, *Bandits, Peasants, and Politics*, 21.

overwhelming majority of combatants and casualties in these years were rural peasants.<sup>43</sup>

To conclude with the analysis of the early *Violencia* period, the *Bogotazo* defined the nature of the Colombian government and the nature of the violence. President Ospina Pérez, in 1949, declared an official state of siege. Among its provisions were the dissolution of Congress, suspension of municipal assemblies, censorship of the press, total empowerment of local (Conservative) governors, and the suspension of the right to assemble.<sup>44</sup> This emergency measure would remain in place for years to come, and provided the government with the means to attack their enemies. At the same time, the state of siege became a permanent structure in the eyes of government and insurgents alike—defining roles and preventing reconciliation. The government adopted a siege mentality, politicizing the police and armed forces, and came to regard the press as an enemy.

The violence in the countryside moved away from political motivations and hence political control. Individual vendettas, local power struggles, and common banditry all contributed to the violence every bit as much as did desire to populist reform. The constant state of siege resulted in permanent loss of freedoms and political voice for those who truly desired reform. Force of arms became their only recourse and Liberal guerrillas had fewer reasons to return to peaceful discourse.

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<sup>43</sup> Gonzalo Sánchez, “Raíces Históricas de la Amnistía o las Etapas de la Guerra en Colombia” *Ensayos de Historia Social y Política del Siglo XX* (Bogotá: El Ancora Editores, 1984), 222.

<sup>44</sup> Fluharty, *Dance of the Millions*, 114-115.

Furthermore, aggressive and unilateral government action quickly set the guerrillas against the state and drove many to prepare for a long, protracted struggle.

## CHAPTER TWO

### ROJAS THE CONCILIATOR: PEACEFUL SOLUTIONS TO LA VIOLENCIA

Cycles of insurgent violence are often ended by the efficient and overwhelming application of more violence. Frequently, combatants do not resolve their differences so much as they end the existence of the weaker party. In the southern cone of South America, for example, the security forces of Argentina faced an urban guerrilla movement determined to bring about leftist revolution. In some of the most “successful” counterinsurgencies of the 1970s, the Argentine military government intimidated, tortured and murdered anyone suspected of complicity with the *montoneros*. Likewise, the Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet crushed resistance by “disappearing” political dissidents and eliminated any significant opposition to his rule. The human price for the victories ran exceedingly high, however, and both nations still suffer from the deep stains of dirty wars. Totalitarian rule, death, suffering, public mistrust of the government, national shame, and a legacy of official secrets follow even the successful repression of armed resistance. It is in earnest, then, that governments seek solutions that require something short of harsh repression



or civil war. By 1953, Colombia was a nation beset by cyclical violence of the deepest and fiercest sort. Paradoxically, a nonviolent resolution attempt in Colombia originated from the least likely source—Lieutenant General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, first and only military dictator of the Republic of Colombia.

Government amnesties represent a popular means of ending civil violence because they pacify combatants without resorting to warfare, arrests, or other forms of official repression. Amnesties function on an optimistic view of social violence. A government concession of amnesty presupposes that the insurgents possess a legitimate fear of or grievance against the government, and will cease fighting if given the opportunity. An offer of amnesty also supposes that extralegal groups will trust the government's good faith. Where there exists a long history of government violence, as in El Salvador and Guatemala in the 1980s, convincing the insurgents to disarm can prove exceedingly difficult. Yet, if the guerrillas believe that peaceful membership in the electorate can offer them both security and a voice, nonviolent reconciliation is attainable. The incorporation of former guerrilla groups into the parliaments of Nicaragua, El Salvador, and others Central American republics stands as evidence of similar successes in the past two decades.

General Rojas Pinilla's efforts to end the Colombian civil war during his 1953-1957 tenure in office illustrate both the ideal forms of amnesty, and its shortcomings. In contrast to the failed efforts of several of his predecessors (1946-1953), Rojas succeeded in pacifying thousands of guerrillas through nonviolent means. Despite tremendous initial popularity and the widespread acceptance of his

amnesty policy, Rojas nonetheless failed to put an end to the cyclical violence that marred Colombian society. How effectively did Rojas employ amnesty as a means of attaining peace and ending *La Violencia*? What unique circumstances of Colombia's situation prevented the complete resolution of conflict through amnesty? Did Rojas commit errors that undid the anodyne effects of the amnesty? The great pacifying potential of the government of General Rojas Pinilla confronted the most intractable social violence...and failed. General Rojas' amnesty initiative restored government control of the crisis and greatly aided in the pacification of the Colombian state, yet it failed to resolve completely *La Violencia* due to weaknesses in the conduct of the amnesty and to the overwhelming effects of the preceding years of violence.

Before proceeding to the discussion of Rojas' amnesty, we must stop to mention the first official amnesty of *La Violencia*. On the tenth of December 1948, Conservative President Ospina Pérez and the Liberal congress offered amnesty for all crimes "committed on the occasion of the events of the ninth of April."<sup>1</sup> This act only forgave crimes. It did not establish reintegration programs, promise a redress of grievances, or guarantee safe passage. It did not require the submission of a weapon in order to qualify. The 1948 amnesty was, above all, an attempt by the government (including both parties) to reassert authority over a society that was quickly becoming lawless. Obviously, the attempt failed. While a few hundred persons came forward, (mostly guilty police officers from the *Bogotazo*) the deeper problem of rural violence

remained. An amnesty offered so quickly after the divisive assassination cooled the anger of few. Furthermore, without any evidence of good faith from the partisan government, insurgents had no reason to believe circumstances would change were they to come forward and accept the amnesty. While we will not analyze this amnesty in depth, the Ospina attempt at reconciliation shows that far more than an amnesty on paper would be necessary to end *La Violencia*.

Rojas inherited the *Violencia* directly from three years of Conservative rule in the Gómez era. President Laureano Gómez left behind him the worst type of situation when he stepped down in November of 1951 due to health problems. He had brutally employed violence yet failed to eliminate the subversive elements throughout the country.<sup>2</sup> Peasants who previously harbored only political differences with the Conservative Party now had reason to fear and hate the national government and its army. Even worse, the policy of arming like-minded peasants meant that a great number of civilians now possessed arms and ample excuses for vendettas against their fellow citizens. Furthermore, the national apparatus of the Liberal Party lost all credibility. Early attempts by the party to restrain the guerrillas now appeared as complicity in the government attacks. The policies of Gómez irrevocably damaged government credibility and hardened the stance of the guerrillas.

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<sup>1</sup> "...cometido con ocasión de los sucesos del 9 de abril." Gonzalo Sanchez, "Raíces Históricas de la Amnistía o las Etapas de la Guerra en Colombia" Ensayos de Historia Social y Política del Siglo XX (Bogotá: El Ancora Editores, 1984), 222.

<sup>2</sup> The following chapter (chapter 3) will present a more detailed account of President Gómez' counterinsurgency and its effect on the nature of *La Violencia*.

Gómez's puppet successor, President Urdaneta, entered office with little or no credibility. He also had to confront a rural insurgency that was fast becoming a permanent fixture. Many of those guerrillas now hiding in the *llanos* had spent more than two years in arms. They had been pushed from their original lands and now existed as soldiers of fortune far from home. The complete distrust the guerrillas had for the government became apparent when Urdaneta made his first attempt at reconciliation. He enlisted former Liberal President López as an envoy to the guerrillas. López brought the guerrillas a message of peace from the government and proposed negotiations. The guerrillas asked him for weapons. In a choice between trusting government goodwill and the force of arms, the Liberal guerrillas chose the latter. López later resigned in despair.<sup>3</sup> A half-hearted amnesty offered by Urdaneta in May of 1952 had little or no effect.<sup>4</sup> *La Violencia* grew deeper by the day.

Ex-President Laureano Gómez reasserted himself as Urdaneta faltered against growing opposition. A moderate faction loyal to former Conservative President Ospina Pérez made gains in the legislature, hoping to reach an elite consensus on *La Violencia*. Unfortunately, Gómez saw this development as a threat to his executive power. Gómez dissolved the legislature and demanded constitutional reforms that strengthened the Catholic Church and limited the power of political parties.<sup>5</sup> When he heard rumors that Pérez had made overtures to Lieutenant General Rojas Pinilla,

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<sup>3</sup> James M. Daniel, *Rural Violence in Colombia Since 1946*, (Washington: Special Operations Research Office, 1965), 66-8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 73-75.

commander of the Colombian armed forces, Gómez attempted to have Rojas assassinated, along with nine other men whose loyalty Gómez suspected.<sup>6</sup> Tipped off by a loyal junior officer, Rojas arrested the leader of this plot. Gómez then attempted to seize full dictatorial powers and have Rojas arrested. Instead, the president's cabinet deserted him and the military promptly deposed Gómez in a bloodless coup. After unsuccessfully urging both Urdaneta and Ospina Pérez to take the presidency, General Rojas assumed power on June 13, 1953.<sup>7</sup>

Gustavo Rojas Pinilla had a solid military past without any political pretensions. He entered the military in 1919, after studying engineering at the National University and later graduating from the Military School.<sup>8</sup> He served at a variety of posts and displayed a general tendency to avoid political positions, preferring command of fighting units.<sup>9</sup> He spent some time in the United States where he served on the Inter-America Defense Board. Rojas developed a progressive attitude towards an active military role in civil assistance. He had commanded the Colombian military since September of 1952.<sup>10</sup> During his tenure as commander of the armed forces, Rojas kept up positive relations with the press and public opinion. He published frequent press releases and attempted to portray a neutral political position for the military. He frequently reiterated the peaceful goals of the military

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<sup>6</sup> Fluharty, Vernon Lee. Dance of the Millions. Military Rule and the Social Revolution in Colombia, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1957), 137-138.

<sup>7</sup> Rojas was, at first, a reluctant president. The problems of the nation were such that party leaders on both sides virtually forced the office upon him. El Tiempo, June 14, 1953.

<sup>8</sup> Silvia Galvis and Alberto Donadio, El Jefe Supremo: Rojas Pinilla en la Violencia y el Poder, (Bogotá: Planeta Colombiana Editorial, 1988), 31-34.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 105-113.

and its separation from political struggles. Predictably, Rojas had a passion for law and order, frequently emitting such stern pronouncements as, "In the year of 1953, the individuals that maraud on the margin of the law will have to respect the lives of their fellows and obey authority."<sup>11</sup> Both parties, as well as much of the Colombian people, saw Rojas as a firm leader who could restore order, yet avoid partisan ambitions.

Rojas' unique, apolitical status gave him tremendous credibility with a population weary of partisan strife. The press, joyful at the exit of Gómez, proclaimed "Colombia Welcomes the End of a Situation that Used to be Intolerable."<sup>12</sup> Students, businessmen, workers, and soldiers all rallied in support of the new regime. For several days after the general's ascendance, various groups held demonstrations in his favor throughout the country.<sup>13</sup> The transfer of power elicited little civil disorder or economic interruption.<sup>14</sup> Following the abuses of the Conservative civilians Gómez and Urdaneta, and the destructive revolutionary tendencies of the Liberals, most Colombians still saw the army as a neutral (perhaps the only neutral) power broker.<sup>15</sup> In particular, they saw Rojas as a moderate general,

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<sup>10</sup> Daniel, *Rural Violence*, 73-75.

<sup>11</sup> "En el año de 1953, los individuos que merodean al margen de la ley tendrán que respetar la vida de sus semejantes y obedecer a la autoridad." *El Tiempo* January 5, 1953.

<sup>12</sup> "Colombia saluda el fin de una situación que era intolerable" *El Tiempo*, June 20, 1953.

<sup>13</sup> *El Tiempo*, June 15, 1953.

<sup>14</sup> *El Tiempo* proclaimed a completely peaceful transfer and even rejoiced at the ascendance of military men to power. The headline ran "Total Normalidad Reina en las Diferentes Secciones del País: Altos Militares se Encargan de Gobernaciones" *El Tiempo*, June 15, 1952, also "Normalidad y Expectative en los Círculos Económicos" *El Tiempo*, June 16, 1953.

<sup>15</sup> True, Gómez and Urdaneta had employed the military for their repressions. Unlike Rojas would do in the future, however, these two Conservatives used the national police to a much greater

for he had stood up to Gómez and won. El Tiempo claimed that the army had always been "Colombia's maximum expression of democracy."<sup>16</sup> Insurgents who had previously resisted any government measure for fear that the other side would take advantage now saw in Rojas an impartial mediator. General Pinilla did everything possible to assist the estimated 20,000 *llanero* guerrillas in this assumption.<sup>17</sup> With all the confidence befitting a dictator, he promised an end to strife and partisanship, leaving only "Peace, Law, Liberty, Justice for all."<sup>18</sup> Colombia now had a government with the credibility necessary to affect an end to the cycle of violence.

Seeing the termination of *La Violencia* as his mandate, Rojas set forth on a policy of reconciliation. He once again allowed the Liberal Party to operate and called on both sides to agree to peace.<sup>19</sup> Instead of the heavy censorship of the Gómez era, Rojas affirmed a gentleman's agreement the Liberal press and imposed no official censorship.<sup>20</sup> Within a week of taking office, Rojas issued a comprehensive order granting amnesty for all guerrillas. His new commander of the armed forces, Brigadier General Alfredo Duarte Blum, ordered all the armed forces:

Give complete freedom to all those individuals who in one way or another have been implicated in subversive acts against the public order and who voluntarily appear before the military authorities

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extent than the army. Also, Rojas' overthrow of Gómez so enthralled the people that they quickly disassociated Rojas from any military abuses of the past.

<sup>16</sup> El Tiempo, June 14, 1953.

<sup>17</sup> Gonzalo Sánchez and Donny Meertens, Bandits, Peasants, and Politics. The Case of "La Violencia" in Colombia translated by Alan Hynds, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 17.

<sup>18</sup> El Tiempo, June 14, 1953.

<sup>19</sup> El Tiempo, June 17, 1953.

<sup>20</sup> At least early in his presidency, the general was primarily concerned about inflammatory partisan rhetoric, and not criticism of his policies. Rojas, like many in the military, blamed a sensationalist media for inciting much of the early events of *La Violencia*. Fluharty, Dance of the Millions, 140.

surrendering their weapons, to protect their lives, to help them return to their work activities, and to assist them with their most urgent needs when circumstances so require and you deem it necessary.”<sup>21</sup>

The amnesty stipulated that guerrillas must turn themselves in along with their weapons. In exchange, Rojas promised amnesty, food, clothes, funds for relocation, and letters of safe passage.<sup>22</sup> He proclaimed, “The problem of the *llanos* will be resolved with generosity.”<sup>23</sup> In later orders, Rojas forwarded additional assurances, always speaking in terms of national reconciliation. In addition, Rojas initiated a comprehensive campaign of negotiations with the guerrillas. He established direct links between regional army commanders and guerrilla leaders. He delegated to Colonel Navarras Pardo the mission of conducting negotiations with guerrilla leaders. The high profile links between the army and insurgents gave credibility to the offer of amnesty. The nonpartisan nature of Rojas’ regime created this overnight trust between soldier and insurgent.

The reaction to Rojas’ concession of amnesty was rapid and overwhelming. Guerrilla leaders came forward and surrendered their entire units in public ceremonies. Some of the most famous bands of insurgents agreed to give up their weapons and infamous guerrilla leaders accepted amnesty. By September of 1953, over 10,000 active guerrillas had left the countryside (mostly the eastern *llanos*) and

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<sup>21</sup> Guzmán, 1968, 141 in Sánchez, Bandits, Peasants, and Politics, 49.

<sup>22</sup> Safe passage, that is, for protection from Conservative death squads. Often these letters had no effect. Such a fact clearly demonstrates the tenuous control even a military dictator such as Rojas exercised over the countryside. El Tiempo, June 20, 1953.

<sup>23</sup> “El Problema de los Llanos se Resolverá con Generosidad” El Tiempo, June 20, 1952.



given up their weapons to the military.<sup>24</sup> Rojas and his government broadcast these successes as publicly as possible, seeking to encourage more surrenders and boost his role as peacemaker.

Lest we make too much of the amnesty itself, this essay must add that the prior campaign of Gómez had done much to exhaust the guerrillas and make them eager for peace. By the time of the amnesty, many of the guerrillas had lived on the run for over five years. The guerrillas of 1953 had endured two years of government offensives perpetrated by the Gómez government. Military operations had forced them to move far from their original homes and bases of support. Malnutrition and poor medical care frequently marked the surrendering guerrillas. In an article published on the occasion of the surrender of a group of *llaneros*, a Bogotá writer describes the state of the guerrillas:

Faces which combined the signs of pain and affliction with an instant happiness and hope: half-naked children that showed tremendous signs of malnutrition and suffering; lean women with faces showing their disorientation with the return [to civilization], in whose rags and whose bitter expressions it was easy to extract a history of suffering and anguish.<sup>25</sup>

The 1953 amnesty under General Rojas achieved the first break in the cycle of violence since 1946. The credibility of Rojas combined with the exhaustion of the guerrillas and their generalized desire for peace led to a demilitarization of the countryside. Rojas had reinstated the authority of the state and constructed the

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<sup>24</sup> Daniel, *Rural Violence*, 82.

<sup>25</sup> Rostros en los cuales se conjugaban la huella del dolor y de la pesadumbre con el instante de alegría y esperanza: niños semidesnudos, que acusaban tremendas muestras de desnutrición y

beginning of a reconciliation between the various, embattled portions of society.

Rojas failed, however, to eliminate completely the subversive elements in Colombian society. Furthermore, he failed to remove the causes for rural violence that inevitably led to its resurgence. The peace lasted only one year, with confrontations flaring up again in early 1955.

Relative peace reigned in the countryside from the fall of 1953 to the fall of 1954. Rojas had not eradicated *La Violencia* but only suppressed it. The eastern *llanos* were by now completely empty of guerrilla bands. A few insurgent communities and roving bandits persevered in the central mountain range, but left unmolested, they posed little immediate threat to public order. Most former guerrillas now lived in their original homes or had been resettled by government programs. In time, failure to deal properly with both the settled guerrillas and those still in the field would haunt the Rojas amnesty.

The guerrillas that remained in the countryside by spring of 1954 represented one of two groups: those who wanted further concessions before surrendering and those who did not want to surrender under any conditions. The latter holdouts were a symptom of *La Violencia*. Years of lawlessness in the countryside had created groups of armed bands that exploited the background of violence. They made their living through cattle rustling, highway banditry, and extortion of coffee farmers. Whatever

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sufrimiento; mujeres magras, de rostros desconcertados por el regreso, en cuyos harapos y en cuyos rictus era fácil adivinar toda una historia de zozobra y angustia. El Tiempo, September 12, 1953.

initial cause they possessed for taking to the jungle no longer motivated these groups of semi-organized criminals.<sup>26</sup>

Those guerrillas who demanded further concessions usually came from a stronger ideological background. They consisted of communists and staunch *gaitanista* Liberals who sought permanent changes in the government of Colombia.<sup>27</sup> A policy of army inactivity brought relative peace to the countryside, despite the remaining guerrillas. Approximately 6,000 guerrillas lived in a communist enclave around Viotá, in southern Tolima.<sup>28</sup> Although they had officially surrendered, these guerrillas lived under their own political and economic system apart from the Colombian government. The strength of this community and its strong geographic position convinced Rojas to ignore the communists' presence.<sup>29</sup>

Most guerrillas identified with Liberal, rather than communist ideologies, and hence accepted the amnesty when Rojas replaced the Conservative government of Gómez. Some of the strongest incidents of holding out occurred in the province of Tolima, where communists had established their own villages and farms. Many guerrilla cells lost membership even as their leaders refused to surrender. The guerrillas demanded land, cattle, and varying degrees of political reform. Rojas

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<sup>26</sup> In fact, the crowds of the *Bogotazo* released thousands of criminals from the government prisons. These outlaws did not qualify for amnesties and hence many lived permanently in the lawless countryside. Daniel, *Rural Violence*, 51-52.

<sup>27</sup> Rojas certainly threw around the "communist" label too often in his discussions of the guerrilla problem. Nonetheless, most of the groups in question professed communist rhetoric and materially cooperated with the Colombian Communist Party. National Intelligence Estimate: Probable Developments in Colombia, April 10 1956, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, vol. 7, p. 908. Hereafter referred to as NIE of 1956.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 909.

created a variety of government commissions to grant loans, plan community improvements, and administer the redistribution of lands. At the time of the amnesty, however, most such plans were nothing more than paper and promises. The leftist guerrillas leaders demanded more, but Rojas wanted only immediate cessation of insurgent activities.<sup>30</sup> The general was no radical, and any reforming tendencies he may have possessed were subordinated by his desire for law and order.

General Rojas Pinilla entered office determined to end the rural violence that had destroyed the governments before him. Despite his tremendous strength and popularity, he had not ended the armed insurgency. *La Violencia* re-emerged in the spring of 1955.<sup>31</sup> By the beginning of 1956, between six and seven thousand guerrillas remained in arms.<sup>32</sup> The following portion of this essay discusses the specific failings of the amnesty that contributed to the resumption of violence.

Traditional rivalries based on politics, religion, or financial disputes continued to feed the fires of cyclical violence even after the 1953 peace. Rojas' successful amnesty could not erase the national tendencies toward spontaneous violence. The years of the *Violencia* had normalized violence for the pursuit of various personal goals. As a result, the challenge facing Rojas was greater than a simple disarmament

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<sup>29</sup> This enclave had successfully resisted earlier invasions during the Gómez era. Daniel, *Rural Violence*, 62-63.

<sup>30</sup> "Rojas quería la rendición rápida e incondicional, en cambio, los jefes guerrilleros pedían tiempo mientras acordaban las condiciones para la entrega." Galvis, *El Jefe Supremo*, 414-415.

<sup>31</sup> Memorandum From the Secretary of State's Special Assistant for Intelligence (Armstrong) to the Secretary of State, 5 Apr 55, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, vol. 7, p. 860.

<sup>32</sup> Memorandum From Albert H. Gerberich of the Office of South American Affairs to the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs (Lyon), *FRUS*, 1955-1957, vol. 7, p. 895.

of the government's enemies. The circumstances he faced, as well as his own decisions as a self-interested leader, undid much of the amnesty.

Rojas' failure to monitor more closely the paramilitary units and local governments played a major role in despoiling the peace. In the initial conduct of the amnesty, there were very few instances of army duplicity. The prestige of General Rojas and his repeated orders to respect the guerrillas had their effect in allowing the guerrillas to return home safely. In this respect, Rojas' reliance on the military proved well-founded. He could control the actions of high level commanders and hence the amnesty proceeded as promised. After returning to their homes, however, many former guerrillas found the same mayors and military governors who had ruled so infamously during *La Violencia*. Now that the leftists' former status as guerrillas was known to all, many local mayors, judges, and citizen bands intimidated the returning guerrillas.<sup>33</sup> Rightist death squads, or *pájaros*, assassinated several famous guerrilla leaders. The deaths of noted *guerrilleros* who had resisted Gómez only to be murdered in peacetime, frightened both peasants and insurgents alike, deepening mistrust as a desire to resist the government. Teófilo Rojas, known as the famous guerrilla "Chispas," later recounted how paramilitaries had killed five leading members of his band in the months after they had accepted the amnesty. Chispas returned to the jungles and assumed leadership of many "amnestied" guerrillas now fleeing rightist vengeance.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Sánchez, *Bandits, Peasants, and Politics*, 20-21.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-57.

Instead of cracking down on such groups, however, Rojas seemed to disbelieve their existence. On several occasions, he released convicted criminals who had belonged to death squads. The most famous example of this trend came when “*El Condor*,” perhaps the most infamous death squad leader, suspiciously escaped from government custody.<sup>35</sup> Rojas total reliance on the military forced him to turn a blind eye to excesses on the part of rightist paramilitaries. He could not afford to discipline death squads since they often maintained close connections with the military. Military units even openly organized and supplied some of the paramilitary bands. Action by paramilitaries eliminated guerrilla leaders who had resisted the government and might one day do so again. A natural alliance of convenience perhaps reduced the zeal with which Rojas controlled the paramilitaries.

Rojas also made short-sighted decisions with regards to his choices of administrators. His reliance on military subordinates caused him to fill nearly every position imaginable with someone in military uniform. One after another, Liberal governors and mayors resigned or retired and Rojas replaced them with officers whose only qualifications were military rank.<sup>36</sup> Especially in the *llanos orientales*, the rising violence caused Rojas to militarize the city governments and court systems. While circumstances certainly dictated an increase in military presence, the system put in place by Rojas could not deal with a peaceful, post-amnesty society. He failed to remove commanders responsible for gross violations of the amnesty, further

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<sup>35</sup> Many fingers point directly at Rojas for allegedly authorizing “*El Condor*’s” release. Galvis, *El Jefe Supremo*, 207-244.

inciting Liberals to return to guerrilla life. Military officers staffed the various government commissions in charge of micro loans, returning displaced peasants, and community development. When these officers did not practice open corruption and nepotism, they frequently lacked the competence to carry out their jobs with the skill necessary to accommodate the amnestied, and yet unwelcome, guerrillas.<sup>37</sup>

Colombia's historically regionalized society added to the difficulty of Rojas' task. Although he had offered an amnesty in good faith, he could ensure that every section of society. Frequently, lack of centralized control meant that local *gamonales* and priests controlled the people, instead of Rojas and the national party leaders. Persons with economic influence in regional communities tended to dominate Colombian politics as patrons of numerous local politicians.<sup>38</sup> Theda Skocpol calls this phenomenon "marginal political elites" whose control over small regions exceeded that of the government. Heretofore excluded from national power, the background of violence enabled local businessmen, party leaders, priests, or landowners to raise and employ guerrillas and paramilitaries to their own ends.<sup>39</sup> Regardless of Rojas' ability to control the armed forces and government bureaucracies, local "marginal political elites" often rekindled the violence that Rojas had worked so hard to quell.

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<sup>36</sup> El Tiempo, September 11, 1953.

<sup>37</sup> The preceding was a list of critical shortcomings. The various commissions created by Rojas nonetheless succeeded in granting tens of thousands of micro loans and returning hundreds of thousands of displaced peasants. Daniel, Rural Violence, 82-84.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21.

Finally, the resumption of violence in the *llanos* arose in response to new land disputes. After the military's evacuation of war zones, much land came under Conservative control. In some cases, the original (frequently Conservative) landholders returned to reclaim lands lost to guerrilla violence. In many cases, however the military sold the lands or gave them to political allies and paramilitary troops. Outraged guerrillas demanded the return of their lands. Unfortunately, few had any official deeds or proof of ownership—indeed, a large squatter population had long occupied the eastern *llanos*. Clearly, the already controversial issue of land ownership in the Colombian countryside became desperately complicated following *La Violencia*. Mainline media outlets tried to take a middle ground. *El Tiempo* voiced support for “those who work the land” over absentee landlords, yet advocated a return of lands to only those who could show proof of ownership.<sup>40</sup> The decrepit state of the courts and local governments meant that the army was usually the only organization capable of carrying out such a policy. As a result, guerrillas were frequently frustrated in their attempts to regain lost land.

Clearly, the amnesty alone could not return Colombia to domestic tranquility. While the 1953 amnesty solved the immediate problem of open violence in society, it could not by itself break the cycle the caused violence to recur. Amnesties rely not on the elimination of subversive elements, but instead on their continued goodwill.

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<sup>39</sup> Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley, *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America. A Comparative Study of Insurgents and Regimes since 1965* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 41.

<sup>40</sup> *El Tiempo*, April 10, 1955.



Should any contradictions or failures arise in the government policy (as happened frequently in Colombia), the insurgents are free to take up weapons once again (which also occurred). Moreover, the 1953 amnesty did not address the problem of criminal violence and impunity unrelated to whatever brought about the insurgency. High levels of criminal violence once again encouraged civilians to arm themselves for defense. While an armed civilian population does not by itself guarantee cyclical violence (consider the peaceful state of modern day Switzerland), complete impunity in their actions does. Amnesty International, a leading international investigator of human rights violations, points to impunity as one of the greatest causes of endemic violence.<sup>41</sup>

Rojas wisely employed a general amnesty as the best means of dealing with the type of violence he faced. Amnesties are the fastest and most comprehensive method to resolve overt violence, providing that two conditions are met. The nature of the government and the nature of the violence are the two general categories for these conditions. First, the government must have credibility with the population at large, and with the insurgents. They must believe the government has both the intention and capability to follow through on any pledge of amnesty. The amnesties offered by President Ospina (1948) and President Urdaneta (1952) achieved negligible results because none of the guerrillas actually believed the government would keep its word. The guerrillas rightly suspected that laying down their weapons

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<sup>41</sup> Amnesty International, "Colombia Briefing," (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1988), 1, 5-6, 12.

would leave them defenseless in an environment of spontaneous partisan violence (under Ospina) or direct government attack (under Urdaneta). The initial ascension of Rojas Pinilla to the presidency had eliminated national partisan struggles. His apolitical nature and military authority guaranteed the credibility and efficacy of the proffered amnesty. In this sense, the nature of the government met the first of the necessary conditions for a successful amnesty.

The second condition is that a large part of the insurgents must be unwilling lawbreakers. That is, some sort of injustice or threat must be the direct cause of their extralegal status. If reassured of their safety, and at least an attempt is made at resolving their grievances, such insurgents will accept an amnesty. In many cases, this assurance is simply the cessation of violence. Rojas did not always succeed in quelling violence against amnestied guerrillas. Widespread impunity re-ignited the rivalries his amnesty had suppressed, and he did not take all the measures possible to restrain paramilitary impunity. Many recent amnesty programs in Colombia, Nicaragua, and El Salvador have convinced guerrillas to disarm with promises of political representation, land reform, and judicial reform on various levels. General Rojas made varied attempts to address issues of land tenure, local magistrates, and rural financial credit, yet these efforts never gained high priority in his administration. His moderate success in delivering even the most basic of these promises limited the sustainability of his temporarily peace. In addition, even the most successful of

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amnesty could not have coped with the entrenched culture of violence and lawlessness.

General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla used the many advantages of his position to quell temporarily *La Violencia* through nonviolent means. He also reasserted the legitimacy of the Colombian state. Rojas instituted a successful amnesty that disarmed thousands of guerrillas and returned them to society. He also achieved a sort of rapprochement with the major political parties and ended overt political strife. Rojas could not, however, overcome the deep-seated obstacles to peace in Colombia. His political position, though a strong one, contained certain weaknesses that hindered his successful, long-term implementation of the amnesty. Following the advent of new hostilities in 1954 and 1955, Rojas would turn to more violent measures.

## CHAPTER THREE

### ROJAS THE GENERAL: MILITARY SOLUTIONS TO LA VIOLENCIA

The legacy of political violence in Colombia made repression, not reconciliation, the default reaction to the *Bogotazo*. The endemic violence of the War of the Thousand Days, not the amnesty of President Rojas, represented historical precedent in Colombia.<sup>1</sup> Despite the successes of Rojas' 1953 amnesty, that nonviolent solution nonetheless fit into a larger framework of state violence against the guerrillas. First Laureano Gómez and later Rojas would attempt to crush political opposition through force of arms.<sup>2</sup> These operations varied greatly in intensity and success. In many cases, government repression created bitter resistance and prolonged *La Violencia*. In others, lack of aggression on the part of the government allowed insurgencies to expand and multiply. This chapter will analyze the

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<sup>1</sup> David Bushnell, "Politics and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Colombia," *Violence in Colombia. The Contemporary Crisis in Historical Perspective*, edited By Charles Bergquist, Ricardo Peñaranda, and Gonzalo Sánchez (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1992), 13-15.

<sup>2</sup> The Urdaneta presidency (Nov, 1951-May 1953) will frequently be referred to as part of the Gómez era, since Gómez represented the true force and direction for the Conservative Party even in his absence from office. The moderate Conservative President Mariano Ospina Pérez (1946-1950)

objectives and methods employed by both Gómez and Rojas in their various military campaigns against insurgents from 1948 to 1957? Why did some campaigns succeed in eliminating guerrillas while others only deepened insurgent resistance? Why didn't Rojas finish off the guerrillas after his successful amnesty? Presidents Gómez and Rojas built up the various tools of state repression and employed a variety of propaganda and political instruments. The methods these two presidents directed at the civil violence shaped the country for decades to come. The former president's approach inevitably foundered in thoughtless violence and paranoia. Rojas' more creative approach combined the anodyne of national reconciliation with the power of the sword to bring modest, uneven success.

The repressive methods of the Conservative governments of 1946-1953 make up the first half of this chapter. Understanding the events of this period is essential to describing why violence in this period grew into *La Violencia*, and did not simply register as another cycle of violence common after Colombian elections. These years tell us much of Colombian history especially in the expression and treatment of political dissent, the dominant two-party system, localized rural violence, and the transformation of military culture. Furthermore, the early years of *La Violencia* created the unprecedented circumstances for the rise of a Colombian military dictator in the person of Gustavo Rojas Pinilla.

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maintained a greater degree of independence during his term, although Gómez certainly played a major role during those years as well.

The second half of the chapter follows Rojas' entry on the national scene and his plan for ameliorating the damage of the previous years. Rojas' political antecedents shaped the nation and government he was to lead toward peace, so much of his strategy appears reactive in nature. At the same time, Rojas demonstrated a clear understanding of the problems facing his country. His actions, particularly in the plurality of his military approach to the *Violencia* reveal much about the character of Colombian society and government, including their development into the present day. The section on Rojas will open with a comprehensive analysis of the guerrilla problem he faced and how it differed from rural violence of years earlier. This essay will also attend to the personality of Rojas and his own goals for the country and himself. Finally, this chapter will ask questions as to motivations of guerrillas and under what circumstances they prospered or dwindled. Government motivations, guerrilla response and organization, and state use of armed civilians will all play a major role in the narrative.

Following the 1948 assassination of Gaitán, the ruling Conservative government braced itself for conflict. Instead of a palace power struggle or a high level bargaining, however, the conflict would take place in the countryside. Long accustomed to using government violence to manipulate elections, the ruling Conservatives endeavored to eliminate the Liberal vote and any criticism of the regime. In 1948, Liberals possessed a majority in the congress and almost certainly

made up the majority of Colombian voters.<sup>3</sup> Aware of this reality, Conservative leaders took steps to tip the scales. In the months and years to come, Liberal citizens of rural areas would face intense persecution at the hands of the government and its allies. This well-established practice of persecuting the losing party after gaining power would become amplified by a variety of factors in the years ahead. First among these catalysts was the ruthless efficiency of Conservative repression upon coming to power.

The initial construction of tools of repression occurred in the months following the Bogotazo. Both the police force and the military underwent drastic changes as a result of the uprising. The army, and to a lesser extent, the police force, entered *La Violencia* as respected and nonpartisan forces, yet they emerged as hated institutions of official violence.

The politicization of the national police force began in the 1930s under Liberal President Alfonso López Pumarejo. President López saw the armed forces (more Conservative than Liberal in nature, but nonetheless inactive) as a possible threat to his "Revolution on the March," and desired to raise a balancing armed organization. To do so, he nationalized the departmental police forces and fostered a new Liberal institution on the national level. This action caused considerable resentment on the part of the military. Furthermore, López used a failed army coup in

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<sup>3</sup> In the 1946 election, for example, the combined total of the (split) Liberal vote significantly exceeded that of the Conservative vote.

1944 to rid the army of numerous Conservative officers, even if they had remained loyal during the coup.<sup>4</sup>

Whatever advances López made in forming a Liberal police force, Conservative governance and the *Bogotazo* both reversed and accelerated the politicization of the police. After Conservatives took power in 1946, President Mariano Ospina Pérez placed a high priority controlling the national police force. He increased their participation in the maintenance of public order in the countryside, drawing accusations of repression from Liberals.<sup>5</sup> Knowing that their party was in the minority and had only won the election due to the split Liberal vote, Conservatives used the police to secure their majority. Liberal minorities suffered intimidation, increasingly at the hands of police rather than local enemies (as in decades past). Instances of torture in prisons became commonplace while Gaitán and other Liberals accused Ospina Pérez of turning the police into a force of shock troops.<sup>6</sup>

The Bogotazo of 1948 completed the politicization of Colombia's police force. During the riots, the desertion of the majority of the Liberal members of the Bogotá police force gave Conservatives the opportunity to revamp national law enforcement. Ospina Pérez, at the promptings of Laureano Gómez, accomplished this

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<sup>4</sup> The 1944 coup serves as another example of the army's apolitical nature during this time period. Despite López's radical reforms and unpopularity with the armed forces, the coup received no broad support from the armed forces, and failed. Douglas Allen Walthour "Laureano Gómez in the Korean War," (M.A. Thesis: University of Texas, 1990) 42.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>6</sup> James M. Daniel, Rural Violence in Colombia Since 1946, (Washington: Special Operations Research Office, 1965), 37.



transformation through a rapid and comprehensive personnel shift. To replace the Liberal police officers, the government recruited peasants in the heavily Conservative Boyacá district of Chulavita.<sup>7</sup> Far more loyal and politically reliable than locally recruited officers, the *chulavitas* became the force of choice for deployment to Liberal areas. Many rural Colombians mark the arrival of the *chulavitas* as the beginning of the *Violencia*. These highly partisan policemen brought arms, hatred, and higher organizations to areas previously untouched by the violence.<sup>8</sup> The 1948 reshuffling of personnel also increased direct federal control of the police force, whereby the state controlled hiring and deployment decisions. For the remainder of *La Violencia*, the federal government would exercise direct control over the police for its own political ends. Even after Rojas' ouster of Gómez and the Conservatives, the national police force maintained a ferocious anti-Liberal character.

The Colombian Army, an institution with a history of noninvolvement in politics, tarried longer than the police, but eventually lost its neutrality due to the divisiveness of the *Violencia* era. Largely formed under Conservative rule in the 1920's, the officer corps nonetheless remained respectably detached from politics during the transition to Liberal rule in 1930.<sup>9</sup> The political reforms of President López (as well as some direct affronts to the officers) angered the military, but the officer corps nonetheless remained loyal to the government. The army also avoided

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<sup>7</sup> Gonzalo Sánchez, "The Violence, An Interpretative Synthesis," in Violence in Colombia. The Contemporary Crisis in Historical Perspective, Edited By Charles Bergquist, Ricardo Peñaranda, and Gonzalo Sánchez, (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1992), 79.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 85.

involvement in the partisan violence that accompanied the 1930 transfer of power. Throughout 1931, violence in the countryside, Conservative opposition to the government, and Liberal abuses of power grew at an alarming rate. A border conflict with Peru flared up into a shooting war in the region of Leticia and the nation united to support the army. An admirable showing by the army in the short confrontation increased respect for the military and raised its legitimacy in the eyes of the population at large.<sup>10</sup> In fact, many historians credit the army with saving the Liberal regime since its successful campaign against the Peruvians detracted national attention and effort from partisan rural violence.<sup>11</sup> In the divisive years of 1930-1932, the small army had proven itself the only institution capable of uniting the people and gaining their respect.<sup>12</sup>

Bearing in mind the growing violence in the countryside and the bitter divisions in Bogotá, it comes as no surprise after that his 1946 election Conservative President Mariano Ospina Pérez made every attempt to become a friend of the military. He raised wages, increased economic protections for the military, promoted military men to political positions. He also attempted to establish personal relationships with high-ranking officers.<sup>13</sup> His rise to power, like that of López in

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<sup>9</sup> National Intelligence Estimate, Probable Developments in Colombia, Washington, April 10, 1956, FRUS, 1955-1957, vol. 7, p. 903-904. Hereafter referred to as "NIE of 1956."

<sup>10</sup> Daniel, Rural Violence, 27.

<sup>11</sup> Fluharty, Vernon Lee. Dance of the Millions. Military Rule and the Social Revolution in Colombia, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1957), 45-46.

<sup>12</sup> John Mark Ruhl, "The Military," in Politics of Compromise: Coalition Government in Colombia, edited by R. Albert Berry, Ronald G. Hellman, and Mauricio Solaún (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1980), 182-183.

<sup>13</sup> Walthour "Laureano Gómez," 44.

1930, marked a changeover in control of the national government and almost guaranteed instability. In the months to come, however, Ospina Pérez would do his best to secure the military's loyalty. While many would characterize the Colombian Army of earlier years as more Conservative than Liberal, the true solidification of political loyalties was yet to come.

The watershed event for the Colombian Army occurred during the *Bogotazo* of 1948. That conflict forever removed the possibility of political neutrality for the military. The Colombian Army, loyal to the Conservative government during the *Bogotazo*, rapidly came under Conservative control in the ensuing months. The police quickly lost control of the rioting in Bogotá and the government had to call on the army. Furthermore, many Liberal police officers deserted and even fought against the army. It did not escape the army's attention that a downtown police station served as the last stand of the rioters.<sup>14</sup> Open warfare between Liberal police officers and Colombian Army units forced the issue of political loyalty. On the second day of the uprising, the timely arrival of an army column saved the presidential palace from rioters.<sup>15</sup> In the months following the *Bogotazo*, the army had to take back, one-by-one the various towns and villages that Liberal rioters had occupied in the uprising. Slow and bloody work, these operations gave the army a taste of their future, and convinced those soldiers with leftist sympathies to seek employment elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> Many Liberal army officers resigned or deserted to the newly-formed guerrilla cells.

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<sup>14</sup> Daniel, *Rural Violence*, 42.

<sup>15</sup> Fluharty, *Dance of the Millions*, 101.

In much the same way as the *chulavitas* replaced Liberal policemen, the army replaced the Liberal officers with picked Conservatives.<sup>17</sup> By the summer of 1948, then, the army had become a political organ. The army had successfully defended the regime from an attack by Liberal sympathizers. It had purged its membership of Liberals and stood ready to do the bidding of the Conservative political leadership. In the years to come, however, the government would misuse this responsibility with reckless abandon.

Despite the rage of the armed forces and the continuing loss of life in the countryside, there yet remained a chance that the leaders of the two major parties might come to an understanding and somehow curtail the crisis. In Colombia, the self-interest of the political elites had historically preserved some shard of restraint during civil wars. This time, however, the failure of Conservative and Liberal elites to arrive at any understanding or limitation of intensity represented a breakdown of consensus much larger than any in the past. Neither a politicized police force nor repression of opposing voters was new to the Colombian political scene, yet never had the police and military been so thoroughly developed and employed for these tasks. Even more so, the sheer ruthlessness of the personalities involved and the hopeless division of the government removed any fetter on popular violence. In addition, the earlier divisions in the Liberal party damaged the opposition beyond any

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<sup>16</sup> Daniel, Rural Violence, 51, 62-63.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

ability to act as a balancing power. Such a total loss of elite control would eventually necessitate the kinds of repression that frequently prolonged *La Violencia*.

The confusion and eventual destruction of the Liberal Party played a major role in the breakdown of state authority and rampant civil violence. The Liberal Party went into crisis after splitting its vote in the election bid of 1946. In the months before the *Bogotazo*, the Liberals had all but ejected Jorge Eliécer Gaitán from the party, then grudgingly accepted him as their nomination. The Liberal elite's action caused critical damage to the party's popularity with the popular classes, both urban and rural. For several months after the *Bogotazo*, the Liberal Party had led a tortuous double existence between collaboration and rebellion. Historian David Bushnell has remarked that during the turn-of-the-century War of the Thousand Days, although the Liberals lost, they "had at least demonstrated that Colombia could not be governed peacefully when one of the two parties was totally excluded from power and subjected to intermittent harassment."<sup>18</sup>

Bearing this history in mind, the *gaitanista* wing of the Liberal Party called for open support of the guerrillas in a direct challenge to Conservative rule. More moderate Liberals hoped for reconciliation with Conservative leaders. In the end, many prominent Liberals preferred to remain ambiguous on the issue of guerrillas, since they hoped to profit from the existence of armed struggle. Hoping to preserve some form of unity, Conservative President Mariano Ospina Pérez appointed a

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<sup>18</sup> David Bushnell, *The Making of Modern Colombia. A Nation in Spite of Itself*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 155.

Liberal, Darío Echandía, as interior minister following Gaitán's death. Labeling his 1946-1950 government the "National Union," Ospina Pérez attempted to strike a reconciliatory tone. The Liberals felt uncertain whether they should play to the newly-mobilized followers of the deceased Gaitán, or close ranks with the traditional Liberal elite. Many Liberals, hoping that the two parties would reconcile as they had so many times in the past, remained in the government.<sup>19</sup> Others gave up, openly siding with the guerrillas and advocating armed struggle against the Conservative regime.

In practice, the Liberal Party chose a double course. After loathing the man for years, the Liberal leadership mourned the death of Gaitán and paid lip service to his memory and attempted to play to *gaitanista* supporters. Alberto Lleras Restrepo, a leading Liberal elite, presided over Gaitán's funeral. Nonetheless, the Liberal newspapers called for calm and the leadership hoped for reconciliation. The guerrillas remained skeptical that anyone in Bogotá truly supported them, and most prepared for a long and lonely struggle. Meanwhile, certain Conservatives meant to profit from Liberal weakness.

Whatever attempts the moderates from both parties made toward reconciliation, extremism on the far right prevented an early end to *La Violencia*. Some elements of the Conservative Party under Ospina Pérez sought to cool the violence and reconcile with the Liberals, yet Gómez overpowered such moderates.

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<sup>19</sup> Sánchez, "The Violence, An Interpretative Synthesis," 84.

More than any one person, Laureano Gómez intensified the partisan strife in Bogotá. From exile in Spain, and later on the campaign trail in Colombia, Gómez attacked the Liberal Party with fierce rhetoric.<sup>20</sup> He frequently declared that the Liberal Party represented "1,800,000 false voter registrations."<sup>21</sup> Several historians label his diatribes as Falangist or Fascistic in nature. He once declared:

In Colombia one still speaks of the Liberal party to designate an amorphous, shapeless, and contradictory mass that can only be compared to or described as that imaginary creation of ancient times: the basilisk. The basilisk was a monster with the head of one animal, the face of another, the arms of yet another, and the feet of a deformed creature, and the whole was so horrible and frightful that merely to look at it produced death. Our basilisk moves on feet of confusion and stupidity, on legs of brutality and violence that press into its immense oligarchical belly; with a chest of ire, Masonic arms, and a tiny, diminutive, communist head.<sup>22</sup>

With words such as these, Gómez incited violence wherever he could, showing no interest in achieving an understanding. In the face of such rhetoric, many Liberals doubted whether peaceful negotiation any longer offered hope. In late 1949, Gómez issued safe passage cards that read:

The undersigned President of the Conservative Directory,  
CERTIFIES: that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ bearer of card No. \_\_\_\_\_  
issued in \_\_\_\_\_, has sworn that he does not belong to the  
Liberal Party. Therefore, his life, property, and family are to be  
respected.<sup>23</sup>

Citizens had to swear the oath before the local priest. Gómez, holding no official government office, nonetheless held the power of life and death over thousands of

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<sup>20</sup> Fearing the crowds, who eventually burned his home, Laureano Gómez had fled to Spain in the days following the assassination of Gaitán.

<sup>21</sup> Sánchez, "The Violence, An Interpretative Synthesis, 85-86.

Colombians and was willing to use it for his own political ends. So intensely did Gómez attack the Liberal Party that he prevented the reconciliation that had formerly come naturally to the "oligarchy."

The Catholic Church also played a major role in inciting violence against Liberals. Furious at *Bogotazo* attacks on its schools, convents, churches, and even the palace of the papal nuncio, the Church threw its full weight behind the Conservative repression.<sup>24</sup> Church leaders publicly condemned the guerrillas and anathematized those who supported the guerrillas. Instead, they pronounced blessings on the defenders of the regime, on those who took up arms against Liberals. Especially in rural areas, where local priests held considerable sway over the peasants, the Catholic Church encouraged violence against Liberals. In cooperation with the government, the Church went so far as to organize a national network of paramilitary bands.<sup>25</sup>

Conservative repression successfully disrupted the Liberal Party and assured an electoral victory in 1950. The rural violence had created refugees, lack of access to polling places, intimidation, and outright deaths of so many Liberals that the Conservatives now appeared sure of winning the election. The Conservatives no longer needed to maintain even the image of bipartisanship that had existed briefly in 1948 and early 1949. In November of 1949, an unknown gunman attacked the Liberal candidate for president Darío Echandía, killing Echandía's brother in the

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<sup>22</sup> Sánchez, "The Violence, An Interpretative Synthesis, 85.

<sup>23</sup> Fluharty, *Dance of the Millions*, 113.

<sup>24</sup> Stephen J. Randall, *Colombia and the United States: Hegemony and Interdependence* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 192.

<sup>25</sup> Sánchez "The Violence, An Interpretative Synthesis," 87.



attempt. Weeks earlier, the official in charge of voter registration had resigned saying the upcoming election would be a “bloody sham.”<sup>26</sup> Later in November, the Liberals withdrew Echandía from the election. The Liberals grew weaker by the day under Conservative repression, yet they still lacked unity: some called for open support of the guerrillas and revolt, while others hoped for an elite agreement in the capitol that would maintain their status.

The continued Liberal disunity gave rise to a deepening of *La Violencia* and weakened the Liberal Party's standing. Knowing that they had little hope of preventing Gómez's election, some members of the Liberal Party attempted a poorly-organized coup in late November on 1949. Liberals in many cities cooperated with local guerrillas in seizing power. In several cases, the coup caused extreme bloodshed owing to guerrilla vengeance. The Liberals of Bogotá, however, hesitated and failed to rise up in the capital city. The army brutally crushed the failed coup. Once again, Liberal police officers played a major role in defending the coup and suffering the army's outraged retaliation.<sup>27</sup> The disunity of the Liberals in the coup of 1949 had increased the ire of the army, confirmed the suspicions of the Conservatives, and taught many guerrillas that they could not trust the Bogotá Liberal leadership.

Partisan violence, including the September 1949 gunfight in Congress, crippled the bi-partisan portions of Ospina Pérez's government and forestalled any

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<sup>26</sup> Daniel, *Rural Violence*, 58.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 61

attempts at reconciliation.<sup>28</sup> When Laureano Gómez announced he would return to Colombia for his imminent election as president, the Liberals realized all hopes for reconciliation were in vain. Even the most pro-elite members could not longer countenance participation in the government. In May of 1949, all Liberals left the Ospina Pérez "National Union" government.<sup>29</sup> After the November attack on Echandía, the rest of the Liberal Party announced its abstention from the upcoming elections. Laureano Gómez subsequently won the election and took office as president in 1950. Conservative repression had successfully defeated the Liberal opposition. At the same time, Liberal division and indecision had critically damaged the party's reputation and ability to control the guerrilla bands in the years ahead. The Conservatives, officially under the Gómez and later Urdaneta presidencies, now faced no obstacles to their abuse of state authority.

By 1950, circumstances had severely reduced the prospects for peace. The life and death of Gaitán had mobilized popular forces while dividing the Liberal Party. Continued irresolution by the Liberals left the guerrillas of the *Bogotazo* alone and suspicious. Meanwhile, the sheer scale of the rural violence polarized both sides and left little room for trust. The Conservative government, led by Laureano Gómez and aided by the Catholic Church, consolidated power and exploited both the *Violencia* and Liberal weakness. With every major obstacle out of his way and power firmly in his grip, Gómez now set out to clear the countryside of the meddlesome

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<sup>28</sup> Fluharty, *Dance of the Millions*, 112.

<sup>29</sup> Sánchez "The Violence, An Interpretative Synthesis," 86.

presence of the guerilla bands. He would quickly learn the depth of the *Violencia* that his actions had largely created.

Gómez launched the first national, concentrated, military campaign against the rural guerrillas in 1950. By this time, the newly-elected President Gómez had complete control of the military. Furthermore, the failed Liberal coup in November of 1949 had terminated all Liberal voices in the government and had given Gómez further justification for military action. He sent soldiers to rural areas, especially those of the eastern *llanos*, in hopes of intimidating guerilla bands much as he had the Liberal voters. The army had little formal training or advanced weaponry for conducting a guerrilla campaign. Their actions took the form of retribution against citizens (since they could not locate the roving guerrillas), rather than true counterinsurgency. Army operations in this first campaign were particularly brutal. Government soldiers threw captured guerrillas out of aircraft in flight or dragged them behind trucks. In addition, the small army took to arming local civilian populations against the guerrillas. Frequently, these civilians committed the worst of the atrocities due to lack of any attempt at oversight or control. The actions of the Liberal guerrillas, in this conflict and in their prior establishment of control, were little better. Frequently, guerrillas assassinated local mayors, military officers, or landowners. Nearly always arriving after the fact, enraged military units burned the nearest village suspected of guerrilla activity. The escalation of violence in this scenario achieved frightening intensity. Surrender or reconciliation was out of the question. The government offensive reduced many guerrilla garrisons in the *llanos*

and forced thousands to flee the area. Nonetheless, a most guerrillas simply relocated and formed sanctuaries in new areas, often arming other peasants displaced by the fighting.<sup>30</sup>

The repression of the Gómez era had as its principle objectives the suppression of the Liberal electorate and the consolidation of Conservative hegemony. As such, Gómez succeeded masterfully, dividing and crippling the Liberal Party in the process. The repression created a major side effect in the expansion and intensification of rural violence, especially in the area of entrenched guerrilla cells. Gómez's military and police tactics may have won an election, but they proved incapable of quelling the violence and actually contributed to its intensification. In addition, the prolonged resistance of Liberal guerrillas began to inspire organized guerrilla cells, the formation of paramilitaries, and a growing refugee problem.

The *Violencia* that Rojas faced in 1953 had hardened and intensified to a far greater extent than that faced by President Ospina Pérez or Laureano Gómez. As the previous chapter demonstrated, the government had lost a tremendous amount of popular legitimacy. More specifically, the armed forces and police had become extremely politicized, the guerrillas had become isolated from the national political debate, and the Bogotá elite had failed to achieve any reconciliation similar to those of generations past. After more than two years of rule under Gómez and Urdaneta,

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<sup>30</sup> Daniel, Rural Violence, 61-64, 72.

the guerrilla problem had risen to the front of national attention. Tens of thousands of Colombians still lived as armed fugitives, generating banditry, refugees, and a crisis of government.<sup>31</sup> To confront this multiplicity of challenges, Rojas implemented a strategy both comprehensive and targeted in nature. The remainder of this chapter will detail Rojas' handling of the *Violencia*, with an emphasis on military measures. The amnesty, expounded in the previous chapter, plays a major role in Rojas' overall plan. Therefore, the remaining analysis will give the amnesty considerable attention in principle, if not in detail.

Casual students of *La Violencia* often compare or even equate Rojas with the Conservative Party. His association with the military and anti-Liberal activities makes such an assumption logical. Nonetheless, this essay must stop to remind the reader that in fact, Rojas assumed power by ousting a Conservative president: Laureano Gómez.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the Conservatives remained in silent opposition to Rojas during much of his term and played a key role in bringing his rule to an end in 1957. Rojas was not a Conservative but rather a military dictator. However much his objectives might have (later) corresponded to those of the Conservatives, Rojas depended solely on the military for his power and protection. Unlike previous Colombian presidents, he did not rely on a political party and its grassroots support. Despite his fabulous initial popularity, Rojas kept the military close and leaned exclusively on that organization.

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<sup>31</sup> Daniel, *Rural Violence*, 40.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 73-75.

Rojas thought it indispensable that the amnesty not only show his own personal generosity, but also that it increase national respect for the military. Seen in the context of Rojas' unique political position, the amnesty of 1953 takes on a new logic. Rather than simply employing the military as a repressive sledgehammer for quashing opposition, Rojas had a more insightful plan. By using the army as the principle administrator of the amnesty, Rojas gave a tremendous boost to his own power base.

The amnesty was, first and foremost, a military operation. Rojas appointed Colonel Alfredo Duarte Blum to exercise direct and prominent control over every portion of the amnesty program.<sup>33</sup> Guerrillas turned in their weapons directly to military personnel and received tools and signed safe conduct passes from the same.<sup>34</sup> Official news reports emphasized the striking, even emotional reconciliation between guerrillas and soldiers. *El Tiempo*, a Liberal newspaper heavily regulated by the government, even had the guerrillas shouting "Viva!" to President, the armed forces, peace, and liberty (in that order)<sup>35</sup> Rojas made sure to identify the armed forces with the cause of peace. His officers called the military, "the protector of the Colombian family, guardian of the peasants and of their liberty, under the protection of justice."<sup>36</sup> The government also gave maximum publicity to military aid to the general population. Taking advantage of the high visibility, army trucks returned refugees to

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<sup>33</sup> After Rojas' coup, the highest rank permitted to other military officers was colonel, as is common when a general becomes president yet retains his military rank.

<sup>34</sup> *El Tiempo*, September 12, 1953.

<sup>35</sup> *El Tiempo*, September 12, 1953.

their homes in the weeks after the amnesty.<sup>37</sup> At one of the largest public amnesty ceremonies, where six hundred guerrillas surrendered their arms to the military, the detachment commander, Lieutenant Colonel Alfonso Ahumada, delivered a speech typical of the Rojas party line:

The new stage in which Colombia finds itself since the accession of His Excellency Lieutenant General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla to the presidency of the republic has brought a new era of tranquility for Colombia, and now with respect to the military forces, there could not exist the most remote suspicion or disturbance regarding the completion of their duties.<sup>38</sup>

Rojas had staked his future on the Colombian military.

In addition to the positive image that the amnesty generated for Rojas and the military, the amnesty generated a correspondingly negative image for those guerrillas who continued to resist. An expert on banditry during *La Violencia*, Gonzalo Sánchez has emphasized the importance of changing public perception of the guerrillas. When members of their own party referred to the guerrillas as “bandits,” Sánchez claims this event signified that certain elite portions of the party had abandoned the guerrilla’s to their struggle.<sup>39</sup> In the months ahead, Rojas would have the ability to use the perception of the guerrillas as bandits (and not “freedom fighters” or “Robin Hoods”) to justify attacks against them.

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<sup>36</sup> “El Ejército es el protector de la familia colombiana, guardián de los campesinos y de su libertad, bajo el amparo de la justicia.” *El Tiempo*, September 12, 1953.

<sup>37</sup> *El Tiempo*, June 24, 1953.

<sup>38</sup> La nueva etapa en que se encuentra Colombia desde el advenimiento a la presidencia de la república del excelentísimo Sr. Tt-General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla ha traído una nueva era de tranquilidad para Colombia ya que de las fuerzas militares no existía la mas remota sospecho e intranquilidad en el cumplimiento de sus deberes. *El Tiempo*, September 12, 1953.

The most obvious effect of the amnesty of 1953 was the dramatic reduction in the number of active Colombian guerrillas. Instead of a nationwide uprising numbering in the tens of thousands, Rojas now faced between five and ten thousand guerrillas in a relatively small geographic area. The map the following page illustrates the sheer scale of the resistance in the *llanos* before the amnesty and the relatively concentrated guerrilla presence after 1953.

While the amnesty reduced the quantity of active guerrillas, the level of resistance from those guerrillas who remained underwent a quantitative increase. No longer did the model of spontaneous violence set in motion by national election cycles fit Colombia's situation. As chapter two has demonstrated, the post-amnesty guerrillas consisted of far more resilient bands of guerrillas than the *llaneros*. Communist communities dedicated to remaining independent of Bogotá's power held large areas of southern Tolima.<sup>40</sup> Experienced guerrilla leaders still marauded with their small bands of veteran raiders in the provinces of Quindio, Santander, and Valle de Cauca. Criminals and bandits also hid in these areas of limited government control. In many of the aforementioned cases, the guerrillas possessed the support and confidence of local populations.<sup>41</sup>

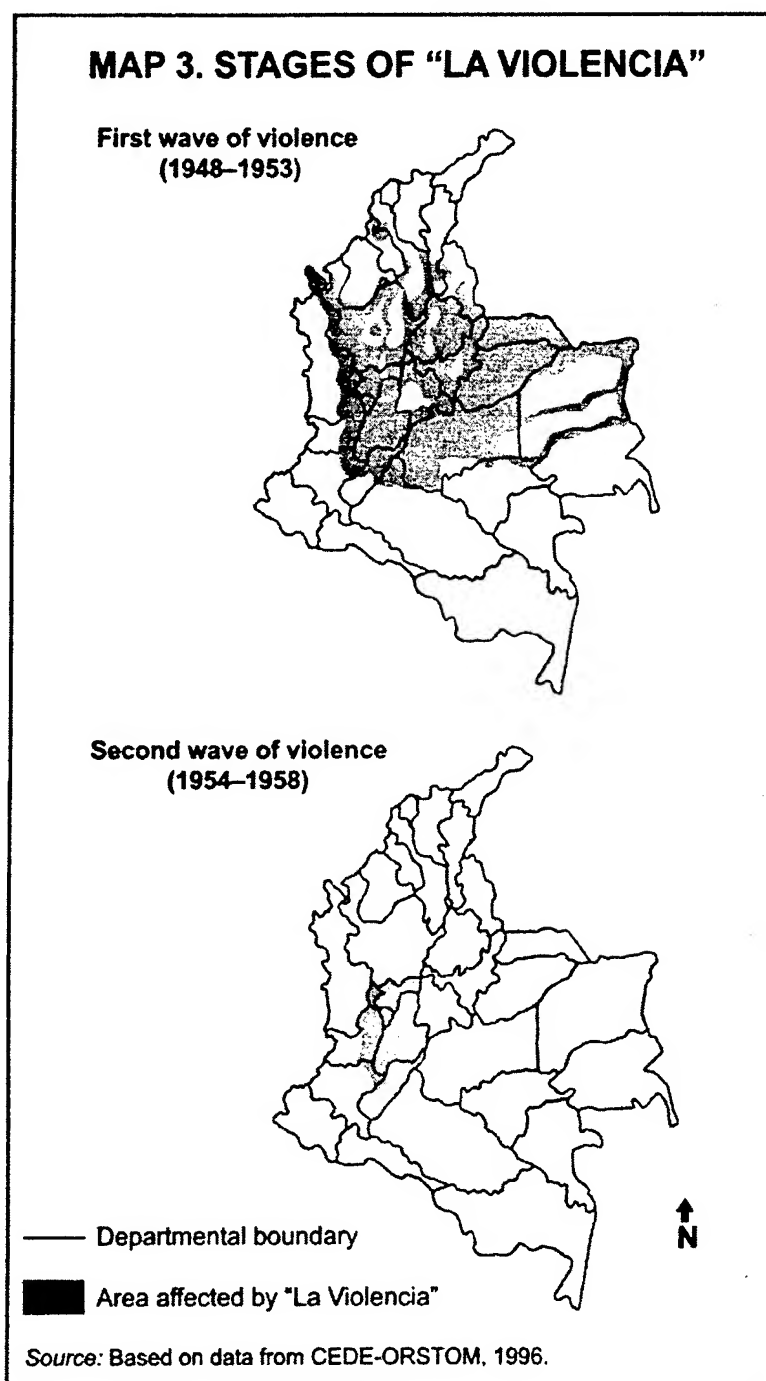
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<sup>39</sup> Gonzalo Sánchez and Donny Meertens, Bandits, Peasants, and Politics. The Case of "La Violencia" in Colombia translated by Alan Hynds, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 19.

<sup>40</sup> Daniel, Rural Violence, 82.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.





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<sup>42</sup> It is interesting to that the note the geographical correlation between the 1950s epicenter of guerrilla activity shown on the map and the boundaries of the encounter zone ceded to the guerrilla

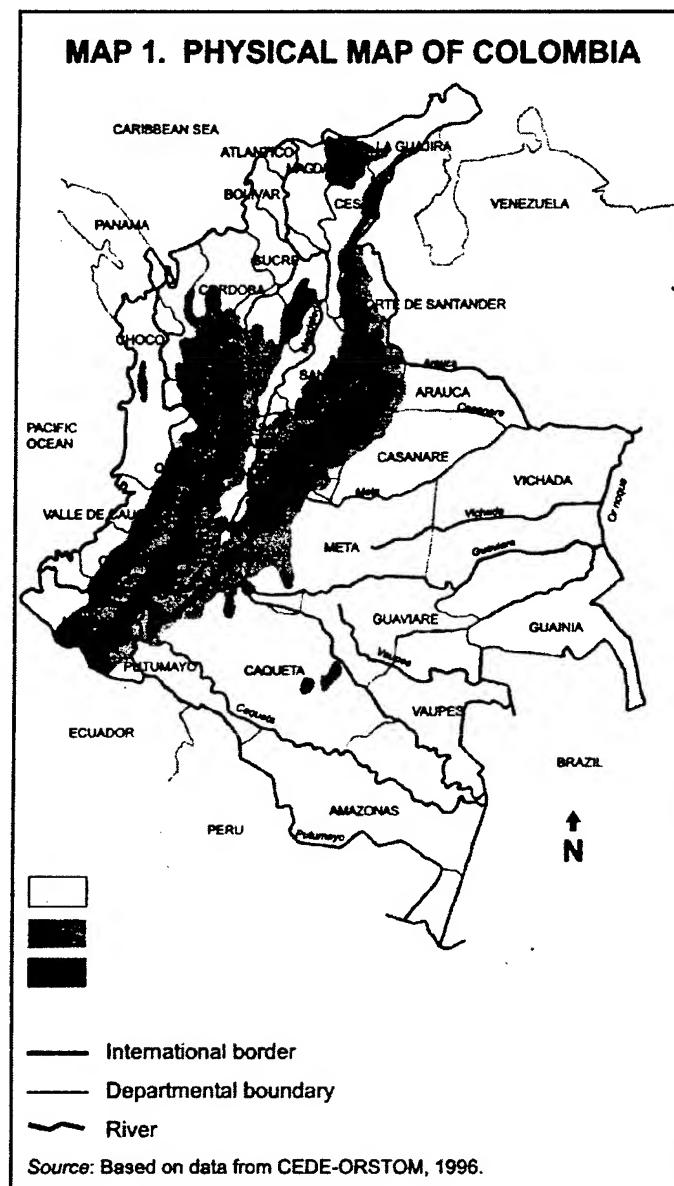
The Commander of the amnesty program, Colonel Navaras Pardo, declared to the public in 1955 that *La Violencia* was no longer political, in that it no longer reflected Liberal-Conservative divisions.<sup>43</sup> He was right in that regard, but the political concerns of the remaining guerrillas had become even more intractable than before. Guerrilla armies now existed in direct opposition to the government, and not just in opposition to the ruling party. They demanded more than just an end to strife, holding out for major changes to the government, perhaps for revolution. Even more seriously, Colombia had now developed a professional guerrilla class. Individual guerrillas had spent as long as a decade fighting in the jungle, even raising their children as guerrillas. Years of warfare had solidified the nature of the violence and complicated the pacification process. Finishing off the remaining guerrilla presence would require efforts more direct than those of amnesty.

Instead of the acute violence of the early *Violencia*, the violence had now assumed far more chronic characteristics. Individual guerrillas had now become famous for resistance to the government. Working out of rural areas where local peasants supported them, guerrilla bands raided the farms, banks, and houses of

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group Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 1998 by President Andrés Pastrana. The latter lies just to the east of the former with a moderate amount of overlap in and around eastern Tolima. Map from Sánchez, *Bandits, Peasants, and Politics*, 36, reproduced courtesy of the Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies, University of Texas at Austin

<sup>43</sup> *El Tiempo*, April 7, 1955.



Compare the above physical map of Colombia to the map on page 17. Note the heavy terrain of the land occupied by the post-amnesty guerrillas in contrast to the llanos orientales of the earlier guerrillas.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Map, Sánchez, *Bandits, Peasants, and Politics*, 14. Used courtesy of the Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies, University of Texas at Austin.

nearby provinces.<sup>45</sup> Frequently, guerrilla bands (or bandit guerrillas, the difference became indistinct) forced peasants to sell their land at extremely low prices just before harvest, or they confiscated the coffee harvest just after processing. In the first method, landowners often employed paramilitaries to intimidate the peasants into selling adjacent lands. This form of profiteering serves as a typical example of non-political actors taking advantage of the atmosphere of violence. The second method arose as a successful means of financing the operations of guerrilla bands.<sup>46</sup> Finally, the new, stronger areas of guerrilla resistance were located in much more formidable terrain than that of the eastern *llanos* (see map on previous page). Government offensives would face more dangerous defenses and have a difficult time locating individual guerrilla leaders.

Rojas never placed the military in a position of head-to-head confrontation with the guerrilla bands. Instead, he chose (perhaps through simple omission) to allow the various self-defense groups and paramilitaries to contain the problem. Of course, Rojas did not make such a policy overtly public. Official press releases and announcements make no mention of paramilitary groups or other unofficial allies of the government and army. The closest references pertain to “functionaries whose charge is the direct control of public order” who in actuality were party officials given control over individual districts.<sup>47</sup> Especially in the area of banditry, Rojas’ tolerance

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<sup>45</sup> For detailed mini-biographies of several prominent *bandoleros*, see Sánchez, Bandits, Peasants, and Politics, 52-57.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>47</sup> El Tiempo, 17 June 1953.

of civilian militias seems to have functioned extremely well in the short and medium terms—keeping large areas of Colombia free of guerrillas and banditry. Instead of marching companies of heavily armed troops through lawless regions, Rojas allowed private citizens to organize self-defense groups and pursue justice without courts or laws. Such operations expanded rapidly and proved capable of eliminating all but the most skilled bandits.<sup>48</sup> These famous guerrillas such as Chispas or Efraín González, survived due to the loyalty of their own local supporters. Unfortunately, the actions of these same paramilitary groups led to the re-arming of many amnestied guerrillas, as the preceding chapter has already pointed out.

In April of 1955, Rojas did order a single, major campaign against an area containing nearly two thousand guerrillas in eastern Tolima. In an impressive military display, involving many tanks and aircraft, the Colombian armed forces invaded this mountainous stronghold.<sup>49</sup> Despite months of fighting and much publicity, the operation did not capture the insurgent leader, Juan de la Cruz Varela, or decisively defeat the guerrilla cells. Instead, the citizens of Tolima bore the brunt of suffering. Rojas imposed martial law and forced the citizens into a hasty evacuation of their homes. Army soldiers looted many of the abandoned homes and military operations damaged significant amounts of civilian property.<sup>50</sup> One year after the operation, government forces had not followed up on the invasion and, in fact, had assumed a highly passive posture.

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<sup>48</sup> Daniel, *Rural Violence*, 86-87.

<sup>49</sup> Many of these weapons had recently been received from the United States, see chapter 4.

General Rojas neither halted regular military offensives nor ordered the elimination of the remaining guerrillas. Instead, the years after 1953 were marked by a gradual crescendo of official repression against the rest of the population (not the guerrillas). Always citing the guerrilla threat, Rojas shut down newspapers, extended the state of siege, forbid the meeting of the legislature, and expanded the army.<sup>51</sup> His regime became increasingly unpopular not for his counterinsurgency operations policies, but for his attempts to perpetuate his stay in office. The general's refusal to lift the state of siege serves as a key factor in the aforementioned process. Although he constantly claimed victory in the war against guerrillas, Rojas never once lifted the state of siege to allow freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, return to democratic elections, or limitations on government power. These actions greatly eroded his support and called into question his desire to follow through on many former promises.

If *La Violencia* served as the mandate for the Rojas government, the continued presence of rural strife became an excuse for the dictatorship's continued existence. Some observers have even speculated the Rojas Pinilla never truly wanted to end all guerrilla activity.<sup>52</sup> The 1955 campaign against communists in Tolima, for example, received far too much publicity and too little serious prosecution for a dictatorial government hoping to end a distasteful civil war. Rather, it seems possible that Rojas

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<sup>50</sup> Daniel, *Rural Violence*, 93-94.

<sup>51</sup> Dispatch from Ambassador in Colombia to the Department of State, July 9, 1957, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, vol. 7, p. 942. Hereafter referred to as "Colombia to DOS."

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 943.

saw the continuing cycle of internal warfare as a justification for his military regime. By the spring of 1956, only 4,500 troops were actively involved in the counter-guerrilla effort. The Colombian Army of that year boasted 32,000 active duty soldiers, with 18,000 more available for counterinsurgency operations under the national police force and 6,000 in the navy and air force. Nevertheless, the guerrillas actually outnumbered the government soldiers assigned to pursuing them.<sup>53</sup> Even the most elementary of counterinsurgency strategies requires numerical superiority over the guerrillas. In a classic example, President Fulgencio Batista of Cuba unsuccessfully employed troops in as much as 100:1 superiority over Fidel Castro's Sierra Maestra guerrillas.

Rojas had adopted a policy more indicative of prolonged skirmishing than of extermination.<sup>54</sup> With his military more well armed than ever before, Rojas could have crushed the few remaining cells, if he had been willing to ignore public opinion—as he had so many times before. Even late in his term, Rojas maintained the loyalty of and solid control over the regular army and its upper officer corps. Public opinion alone did not stop Rojas from making this decision. His failure to prosecute the offensive against the guerrillas led to three more years of *La Violencia*.

General Rojas did not lose his popular mandate as a result of militarizing the guerrilla war. Rather, he alienated one support group after another until even his own military officers advised him to resign. Rojas accomplished this alienation through a

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<sup>53</sup> NIE of 1956, 909-910.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 910

baffling series of repressive policies. The U.S. ambassador to Colombia described Rojas' personality as "A Messiah complex combined with a personal lust for power and wealth and an intolerance of opposition and criticism."<sup>55</sup> Chapter four will detail the exact circumstances of Rojas' downfall. Nonetheless, he fell not due to public outcry over violence or repression, but rather from specific actions that led to his gradual estrangement from his supporters. Leaders from both political parties forced Rojas to resign on the tenth of April, 1957. After his initial success in 1953, Rojas had seen *La Violencia* gradually expand during his later years in office.

The end of *La Violencia*, if there has been one, came with the Liberal-Conservative coalition government of the National Front, which succeeded Rojas. Ironically, the National Front government brought a conclusive end to the *Violencia* through counterinsurgency methods identical to those that Rojas came so close to implementing successfully. The government offered a broad amnesty in 1958 to rob the guerrillas of popular legitimacy and prove the government's desire for peace. Thereafter, the National Front embarked on a ruthless military campaign of extermination against any guerrillas still resisting Bogotá's authority. At the same time, the government used the respected status of the military as tool for expanding its legitimacy. A series of civic action campaigns generated trust for the army and the government. Throughout the late 1950s and 1960s, the National Front employed the

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<sup>55</sup> Colombia to DOS, 944.



army in a reconciliatory role throughout society. Historian David Bushnell writes of the successful “civic military action:”

...whereby military detachments were deployed to build needed road and schools and clinics in violence-afflicted areas—and army dentists to fill cavities free of charge in peasant mouths—all with a view to gaining the confidence of the rural population, without which true pacification would not come.<sup>56</sup>

The new government succeeded in de-politicizing the army and using it to gain popular support. The nonpartisan National Front remedied most of the totalitarian excesses of the Rojas administration and terminated at last *La Violencia*. Nonetheless, the missed opportunity of the Rojas period added years of divisive bloodshed.

Rojas erred not in delegating responsibility for the guerrilla problem to the military, but in insufficiently regulating those parts of the government at the fringe of military control. Regional politicians, national police forces, and paramilitary groups committed nearly all the abuses that led to the resumption of *La Violencia*. Rojas acquiesced to the policy of allowing civilian allies to fight alongside the army. Despite their obvious effectiveness in combating guerrillas, the *pájaros* more than cancelled out their utility by re-inciting guerrillas who had accepted amnesty.<sup>57</sup> The bad blood between rival civilian factions only increased through *pájaro* participation. Rojas also failed to replace corrupt or cruel leaders who stained the image of the army

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<sup>56</sup> Bushnell, *Making of Modern Colombia*, 226.

<sup>57</sup> These amnestied guerrillas made far better targets than those in the bush, after all. Most of the *pájaro* bands were known more for cruelty than for enlightened counterinsurgency tactics.

and prevented reconciliation. His increasing dependence on military support for his regime precluded his ability to regulate the military and punish abuses by the leadership. Finally, Rojas failed to eliminate those vestiges of *La Violencia* that did not respond to amnesties. Whether from fear of failure or desire to preserve his usefulness, Rojas never brought the full weight of the Colombian Army against the communist strongholds and guerrilla leaders that continued to promote insurgencies and erode the legitimacy of the government. For this reason, yet another government with yet another popular mandate would have to finish the job.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ROAS, THE UNITED STATES, AND COLOMBIAN POLITICS

During the Cold War, Latin American governments, and particularly dictatorial governments, often maintained close military relationships with the United States. The North Americans sought allies of many stripes in Washington's struggle against communism in all its forms. In Latin America, direct military cooperation with the United States could play a major role in the ability of governments to maintain their rule. Dictatorships such as those of President Fulgencio Batista of Cuba or the Somoza family in Nicaragua drew a large portion of their domestic power from their relationship with the United States--especially late in their terms. Continued support from the United States could determine domestic outcomes in those countries and mandated policy decisions of dictators so supported. Despite this common perception of the U.S. relationship with Latin American dictatorships, Colombia's dictator General Rojas Pinilla exhibited some, but not all of these characteristics.

This chapter will provide a closer look at the person of Rojas and his priorities as evidenced by his external dealings with the United States, and the effect that relationship had upon Rojas' overall strategy and success internal to Colombia. How did the U.S. respond to Rojas' rise to power, and why did the U.S. reaction change over time? What role did U.S. military aid play in Rojas' ability to continue his repressive policies? And ultimately, why did Rojas fall from power and how did his relationship with the United States factor into this fall? As a dictator, Rojas largely ignored U.S. attempts to influence his internal policies. U.S. influence in Colombia figures most prominently in the area of direct military aid, since Rojas relied heavily upon his armed forces. Here, political reality forced at least a small level of Colombian accommodation with the United States. Nevertheless, General Rojas Pinilla lived and governed based on internal factors. He ignored a crescendo of U.S. criticism, choosing instead to seek to continued power through domestic factors. His personality and policy decisions, and not pressure or education from the United States, ultimately shaped the character of his regime. Rojas succeeded in manipulating the United States or at least avoiding overt U.S. pressures to modify his rule.

The general structure employed by this chapter consists of three basic parts. First, it will establish the priorities and general directions implicit in the U.S. foreign policy of the period. Since the Cold War foreign policy of the United States easily exceeds the analytical limits of this paper, the first section will require something of a summary tone, relying on secondary sources and common consensus. Next, the

chapter will outline the same foreign policy priorities for Colombia and General Rojas, with particular attention to the internal factors acting upon Rojas. The preceding chapters have already presented a considerable amount of data on this subject. The third, largest section will illustrate how these differing priorities shaped the U.S.-Colombian relationship. Specifically, a series of events shows how Rojas succeeded in manipulating the United States—spurning international opinion in order to preserve his power base at home. At the same time, the reality of Colombian domestic politics eventually caught up with Rojas, resulting in the end of his rule.

This chapter will employ a large number of primary sources from the United States military and Department of State. The censorship and secrecy of the Rojas era (combined with a suspicious fire in the government archives) limits the availability of Colombian primary source documents from this period.<sup>1</sup> Not only are U.S. records more attainable than Colombian sources, but they all also tend to be less biased as well. Of course, U.S. sources contain their own biases. Early Cold War documents show a tendency to suspect communists for nearly every sinister event. Also, North American analysts of Colombia did not always possess exemplary regional expertise. Bearing these in mind, this chapter will seek to assess the very real forces that acted upon Rojas as he sought to shape and sustain his rule.

U.S. hemispheric foreign policy during the Cold War concerned itself primarily with the goal of containing communism. Assistant Secretary of State

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<sup>1</sup> Fluharty, Vernon Lee. Dance of the Millions. Military Rule and the Social Revolution in Colombia, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1957), 102.

Edward Miller would remark in 1950, "The basic situation in the hemisphere today is this. The 21 American states together face the challenge of Communist political aggression against the hemisphere."<sup>2</sup> The United States willingly supported military buildups in Latin American countries due to the presence of the communist threat. In plain English, the Department of State Bulletin explained the motivations for this U.S. policy:

The United States is giving military aid to Latin American countries because of three fundamental facts:

1. This hemisphere is threatened by Communist aggression form within and without
2. The security of strategic areas in the hemisphere and of inter-American lines of communication is vital to the security of every American Republic; and
3. The protection of these strategic areas and communications is a common responsibility.<sup>3</sup>

The single, overriding objective of containing communism often displaced other priorities such as the promotion of democracy or support for peaceful regimes. The United States of Joseph McCarthy directly coincided with the Colombia of Gómez and Rojas.<sup>4</sup> It is precisely the chronological coincidence of these two eras in the separate nations that created advantages for Rojas in his relations with the United States. Within the hemisphere, the United States feared Soviet incursion into the Latin American nations. This paranoia, justified or not, so dominated U.S. foreign

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<sup>2</sup> Lars Schoultz, Beneath the United States: A History of US Policy Toward Latin America, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 335.

<sup>3</sup> "Military Assistance to Latin America," Department of State Bulletin, (Washington: March 30, 1953), 464.

<sup>4</sup> Schoultz, Beneath the United States, 334.

policy in the region that it remained beyond question for most of the 1950s.<sup>5</sup> Both U.S. electoral politics and internal bureaucracy politics would lead the United States to pursue a predictable anti-communist line open to manipulation by Rojas and other Latin American dictators.

The United States' initial goal for military cooperation with Latin America was to forge a hemispheric alliance against communist expansion. The 1947 Rio de Janeiro Conference and subsequent treaty embodied this hope. At the Rio Conference, the United States attempted to form the Organization of American States (OAS) into a quasi-military alliance. The member states would vow to assist each other in resisting any incursions by outside aggression. In practical terms, this proposal meant that the United States would supply arms to Latin American nations in exchange for a hemispheric commitment to uphold the Monroe Doctrine ideal of keeping the hemisphere closed to outside (read: communist) influence.<sup>6</sup>

The OAS that the United States envisioned at the Rio de Janeiro conference never materialized due to U.S. inaction and Latin American reluctance to trust the United States. The U.S. Congress never authorized significant arms sales to the several Latin American states who requested them. In addition, the Latin American states manifest a general reluctance to enter into such a tight military alliance with their far stronger, northern neighbor. The Rio Treaty seemed to guarantee U.S. rights to intervene, but few countries believed the United States would follow through on its

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<sup>5</sup> Schoultz, Beneath the United States, 339-340.

obligations to support and protect the smaller nations.<sup>7</sup> Finally, many member nations decried the militarization of the OAS, since they envisioned the OAS as a cooperative pact that would ease economic sufferings in Latin America—hopefully with the help the United States.<sup>8</sup>

With the failure of the Rio Treaty to guarantee against communist intervention in the hemisphere, the United States turned to more practical bilateral relationships.<sup>9</sup> In select what kind of government it would engage with, the United States generally preferred stability over disorder. Stability reduced uncertainty, promoted profitable economic activity, and decreased the odds of communist subversion. Dictatorships offered this stability where the uncertainty of elections or populism could not. Furthermore, dictators exhibited a greater degree of responsiveness to U.S. demands, since their rule has little to do with public opinion. In Guatemala, for example, the United States preferred a pliable dictator in Castillo Armas over the moderately anti-U.S. democracy of Jacobo Arbenz.<sup>10</sup> The United States, suspicious of mild communist influences in the Arbenz government, initiated a 1954 coup to replace Arbenz with a more “reliable” man in the brutal dictatorship of Armas.<sup>11</sup> The United

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<sup>6</sup> John Child, Unequal Alliance: The Inter-American Military System, 1938-1978, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982), 95-99.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 104-115.

<sup>8</sup> An attempt at such assistance came during President John F. Kennedy's rethinking of the US-Latin American relationship in the form of the Alliance for Progress. Child, Unequal Alliance, 149-152.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 114-115.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen C. Schlesinger and Steven Kinzer, Bitter Fruit: The Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala, (Garden City: Doubleday, 1982), 104-106.

<sup>11</sup> Nick Cullather, Secret History: The CIA's Classified Account of its Operations in Guatemala, 1952-1954 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 35-55. See also Piero Gleijeses,



States expressed repeatedly its willingness to support nearly any government that showed willingness and ability to resist communism. Even a dictator as cruel as the Dominican Republic's Rafael Trujillo Leonidas received U.S. congressional praise as "the bulwark which has protected our southeastern sea frontier from atheistic communism." A State Department official said of Luis Somoza Debayle "He is a man of high intelligence and courage and does not pussyfoot when it comes to handling the communists."<sup>12</sup> The United States came to support friendly dictators in Latin America through a combination of short-term convenience and ideological bias.<sup>13</sup>

The United States initially approved of the Rojas regime due to its promise to restore order and combat communist influence in the region. A brief, June 18, 1953, press release stated that the United States desired to carry on normal diplomatic relations with Rojas because, "the new government has established effective control over Colombian territory and has given assurances of its intention to fulfill the international obligations of Colombia."<sup>14</sup> All things being equal, the United States might have preferred a democratically-elected president over a dictator, but the dynamic situation in Colombia required a strong hand. Rojas' popularity with the two major parties, as well as the population at large, showed his ability to restore

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*Shattered Hope. The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944-1954*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

<sup>12</sup> Schoultz, *Beneath the United States*, 354.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 346-348.

<sup>14</sup> "Diplomatic Relations Resumed with Colombia," *Department of State Bulletin*, (Washington: 29 June 1953), 927.

order and prevent revolution.<sup>15</sup> United States ultimately preferred Rojas over whatever uncertain and unsavory alternatives lay beyond him.

In addition to Rojas' ability to restore order, his strong anti-communist stance caused the United States to embrace his new government. In August of 1952, the various Colombian leftist organizations had held a meeting in the communist enclave of Viotá. The United States feared a nationwide movement would create a revolution as rapid and total as that of Mao Tse-tung in China, only a few years earlier. As a military general, Rojas promised a firmer hand against communist subversion. Even more so, Rojas came to office pronouncing his eagerness to conduct an offensive to rid Colombia of communists altogether. Rojas' aggressive stance on communism greatly endeared him to a worried U.S. government.<sup>16</sup>

In Colombia, General Rojas Pinilla maintained a completely different foreign policy posture than that of the United States. Instead of the exterior threat of communism that drove U.S. foreign policy, Rojas' foreign policy revolved around domestic concerns. His regime faced no cross-border threats, but rather, internal threats. General Rojas' foreign policy had as its primary objective the strengthening of the Colombian armed forces and the legitimization of his continued rule. Rojas' major domestic threats involved rural insurgencies. Outside of propaganda announcements, he made no great distinction between communist insurgents, Liberal

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<sup>15</sup> "Total Normalidad Reina en las Diferentes Secciones del País: Altos Militares se Encargan de Gobernaciones" El Tiempo, June 15, 1952, also "Normalidad y Expectative en los Circulos Económicos" El Tiempo, June 16, 1953.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen J. Randall, Colombia and the United States: Hegemony and Interdependence (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 210.

insurgents, and simple bandits. Rojas sought to increase his military strength even in the face of a comparatively small insurgency. Rojas used his knowledge of the United States' foreign policy priorities to increase U.S. support for himself and his military. At the same time, his increasingly high reliance on the military led him to seek an expansion of the armed forces at the expense of pressing social and economic needs.

Perhaps the most dynamic element shaping U.S.-Colombian relations during this period was the presence of a Colombian battalion fighting with United Nations forces in the Korean War. North Korean forces, armed and supported by the Soviet Union and later China, attacked South Korea on June 25, 1950. Within hours, the United States resolved to resist this expansion of communism. After receiving an immediate UN Security Council resolution authorizing a collective use of the force, the United States set out to gain allies in its fight against communist North Korea.<sup>17</sup> International participation would increase the legitimacy of the U.S. effort in Korea. Although the United States expected little real military value from the participation of Latin American troops, military cooperation would demonstrate hemispheric solidarity in the struggle against communism. In addition, the United States hoped that Latin American participation in the Korean War would "arouse public opinion in

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<sup>17</sup> Walthour, "Laureano Gómez in the Korean War," 51-52.

Latin America more firmly than ever against Communist programs and activities within their own countries.”<sup>18</sup>

Due to the high threshold placed on any Latin American offers of aid, few countries came forward to assist. General Douglas MacArthur, commander of the U.S.-led “Unified Command,” insisted that any foreign contingents possess sufficient manpower (at least 1,000 soldiers) and training to play a constructive role in the war effort.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, U.S. laws required that other nations reimburse the United States in cash for any equipment provided by U.S. forces. Most of the Latin American nations lacked the resources to provide for such a force, and negotiations broke down with several of the larger nations. President Laureano Gómez of Colombia came forward, however, with a battalion-sized force.<sup>20</sup> Although the Colombian battalion did not possess satisfactory equipment, the United States decided to supply standardized U.S. equipment. In the interest of the speedy addition of Colombia troops, the United States postponed the question of Colombian reimbursement for the equipment.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Director of the Office of Regional American Affairs John C. Dreier in Walthour, Laureano Gómez, 54.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>20</sup> Although he would later use the Korea Battalion to gain leverage in demanding arms, Gómez may have possessed other motivations for sending the troops. Historians have speculated that he also desired to distract attention away from *La Violencia* and his repressive regime, or perhaps he saw Korea as a convenient place to dispose of unwanted Liberal military officers. Liberal officers made up a disproportionately high percentage of those assigned to the Korea Battalion. Child, Unequal Alliance, 116.

<sup>21</sup> With a total Army size of between 20,000 and 30,000, the commitment of 1,000 trained troops to a foreign war seems illogical for a country undergoing its own civil war. Gómez had other motivations, as this chapter explains at various locations. Among these motivations were desire to exile Liberal officers, desire to detract international attention for his repressive domestic policies, and

Laureano Gómez, who ruled Colombia for the majority of the Korean War, used the presence of the so called "Korea Battalion" as a powerful negotiating chip in dealings with the United States.<sup>22</sup> Gómez made repeated threats to withdraw the battalion in order to pressure the United States into promising more military aid.<sup>23</sup> With predictable logic, Gómez and his ambassadors maintained that they would need to "withdraw their battalion in Korea on the ground that the battalion and its equipment are needed at home in view of their inability to obtain equipment from the United States."<sup>24</sup> As the only Latin American force participating in the Korean War, the Korea Battalion possessed significant symbolic value for the U.S. war effort. Should Gómez withdraw the battalion, the United States' reputation as a close partner (and not an overlord) of Latin American governments would suffer.<sup>25</sup> Secretary of State Dean Acheson even cautioned that Colombia's withdrawal could initiate a "chain reaction" departure among other nations participating in the U.N. Korean forces. In return for his skillful diplomatic maneuvering with the United States,

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desire to gain additional arms from the United States. Walthour, "Laureano Gómez in the Korean War," 53.

<sup>22</sup> Douglas Allen Walthour, in an exhaustively researched and documented master's thesis, has weighed the various motivations that led Gómez to commit the Korea Battalion. He finds that Gómez's desire to gain extra leverage with the United States in arms negotiations serves as the primary motivation among several, self-serving ends. Walthour, "Laureano Gómez in the Korean War), 165-172.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 143-144.

<sup>24</sup> Memorandum by the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs (Mann) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs (Miller), *FRUS*, 1952-1954, vol. 4, p. 778. Hereafter referred to as "Mann to Miller."

<sup>25</sup> The Assistance Secretary of State for United Nations Affairs (Murphy) to the United States Representative at the United Nations (Lodge), *FRUS*, 1952-1954, vol. 4, p. 803-804.

Gómez gained arms, capital, and international legitimacy.<sup>26</sup> Even though the United States had eagerly sought the participation of Colombia, the Korea Battalion rapidly became a thorn in its side.

Even before he became president, Gustavo Rojas Pinilla actively supported the practice of obtaining U.S. arms for the Colombian military. As head of the armed forces, Rojas personally threatened to withdraw the Korea Battalion in September of 1952, and implied to the U.S. ambassador that this threat was linked to the U.S. failure to deliver arms as promised.<sup>27</sup> Over two years after the original requests by Gómez, Colombia still had not received most of the promised U.S. arms shipments of small arms, aircraft ordinance, and aircraft.

When Rojas assumed the presidency in June of 1953, he made the acquisition of U.S. arms one of his highest foreign policy priorities. Even though the Korean War ended shortly after he became president, Rojas used the service of the Korea Battalion to obtain arms. Colombian Ambassador Eduardo Zuleta Angel consistently reminded the United States of Colombia's participation in the war, demanding arms above and beyond those promised to Gómez. He stated that despite his country's contribution, Colombia still ranked in the middle of Latin American nations receiving military aid.<sup>28</sup> The Korea Battalion served with considerable distinction in the

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<sup>26</sup> Gonzalo Sánchez, "The Violence, An Interpretative Synthesis," in Violence in Colombia. The Contemporary Crisis in Historical Perspective, Edited By Charles Bergquist, Ricardo Peñaranda, and Gonzalo Sánchez, (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1992), 88.

<sup>27</sup> Walthour, "Laureano Gómez in the Korean War," 141-142.

<sup>28</sup> Memorandum From Albert H. Gerberich of the Office of South American Affairs to the Director of the Office (Atwood), 20 January 1955, FRUS, 1955-1957, vol. 7, p. 855.

Korean War, and two Colombian presidents made sure the army benefited from that service.

In the months before Rojas assumed the presidency, the United States had begun to exhibit considerable reluctance to provide weapons to Colombia. Gómez's excesses had cooled U.S. enthusiasm. In June of 1953, the United States still had not delivered most of the arms it had earlier promised to Gómez. As many other nations had learned, U.S. legislative procedures made the transfer of arms exceedingly slow and difficult. In addition, the State Department had expressed reservations due to the probability that any arms might be employed against Gómez's internal, political opponents, and not against outside communist aggression.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, within a decade of Gómez's fall from power, various guerrillas spoke out against U.S. military aid to Colombia as one of the most audacious examples of U.S. imperialism.<sup>30</sup> Colombia's primary responsibility under the inter-American defense plan was to protect the sea approaches to the Panama Canal. In contrast, the majority of Gómez's and later Rojas' requests concerned anti-personnel weapons of dubious value in defending the canal.<sup>31</sup> Just before Rojas took office, then, the State Department had resolved to limit military aid to weapons useful for hemispheric defense, and not internal

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<sup>29</sup> Memorandum of a Conversation, Department of State, May 19, 1955, FRUS, 1955-1957, vol. 7, p. 866-867. Hereafter referred to as May 19 Memorandum.

<sup>30</sup> Modern FARC and other guerrilla propaganda make considerable mileage out of US aid to the "oligarchy." Whatever the truth of these statements today, modern sentiments grew from the seeds of the Rojas era, where the United States warmly embraced a dictator and amply supplied weapons to repress the ideological forefathers of the FARC. FARC-EP "Declaración Política: La Patria Está Amenazada" (Montañas de Colombia: Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo, 2000), ONLINE <http://www.farc-ep.org>.

repression.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, the United States did allow the Korea Battalion to retain, free of charge, all of the equipment that the U.S. Army had furnished to the battalion during the course of the war. Aside from understanding the difficulties inherent in reclaiming loaded weapons from a large group of unwilling infantrymen, the State Department also believed that this limited arms transfer would placate Rojas. They were wrong. Rojas continued to press for more numerous and more destructive weapons

General Rojas used his knowledge of U.S. foreign policy priorities to manipulate the United States. His service at the Inter-American Defense Board had given him the opportunity to observe U.S. attitudes toward military aid.<sup>33</sup> As president, he went out of his way to characterize the guerrillas as communist inspired, when only a small number had decidedly communist organizations. In addition, there existed no evidence that any groups received direct aid, or even communicated with, the Soviet or Chinese communists. To establish this (nonexistent) connection, Rojas claimed that many guerrillas hailed from German, Czech, and Russian backgrounds. In doing so, he hoped to justify the use of U.S. weapons against these outside influences.<sup>34</sup> Rojas knew that official U.S. policy authorized weapons disbursements for the purpose of hemispheric defense against communism. By portraying the insurgent

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<sup>31</sup> For example, Gómez requested cluster bombs for his air force, as opposed to standard iron bombs. Iron bombs can penetrate ships' hulls, while cluster bombs are only effective against lightly armored or unarmored targets—such as guerrillas. Randall, *Colombia and the United States*, 201-204.

<sup>32</sup> In practice, these weapons were anti-aircraft guns, ships, and airplanes. Mann to Miller, 778-779.

<sup>33</sup> Daniel, *Rural Violence*, 73-75.



threat as a foreign incursion, (rather than the domestic opposition it truly was) Rojas made it more difficult for the United States to refuse his petitions for arms.

Even as the United States became increasingly skeptical of Rojas' intentions, the military relationship between Rojas and Washington remained tight. As this chapter has mentioned earlier, Washington initially saw Rojas as a positive step for Colombia. The amnesty and rapid reduction in violence reinforced the United States' opinion of the new, benevolent dictator. In 1955, Colombia took delivery of six light attack planes, nineteen medium bombers, and some antiaircraft artillery guns.<sup>35</sup> The United States also sent equipment to re-arm an older Colombian frigate. In addition, the United States established the *Escuela de Lanceros* to train Colombia soldiers in counterinsurgency warfare tactics.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, the United States grew frustrated with the Rojas' government's misuse of the proffered military aid. Rojas' had dispersed the original Korea Battalion and also failed to assign U.S.-trained specialists to their most effective areas. He also understaffed the U.S.-supplied antiaircraft battalion (the guerrillas had no airplanes) and reallocated some of its supplies.<sup>37</sup> Rojas' concern for personal control of the military and wielding power against insurgents caused him to ignore the advice and urgings of the U.S. government and military. All the while, Rojas complained about the slow delivery of

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<sup>34</sup> Telegram From the Ambassador in Colombia (Bonsal) to the Department of State, 18 May 1955, FRUS, 1955-1957, vol. 7, p. 864.

<sup>35</sup> Memorandum From Byron E. Blankinship, Officer in Charge of North Coast Affairs, to the Director of the Office of South American Affairs (Atwood), 27 May 1955, FRUS, 1955-1957, vol. 7, p. 868. Hereafter referred to as "Blankinship to Atwood."

<sup>36</sup> Robert W. Drexler, Colombia and the United States. Narcotics Traffic and a Failed Foreign Policy, (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1997), 74.

U.S. weapons and the lack of additional aid, despite Colombia's record of service in Korea.<sup>38</sup>

As Rojas continued to demand weapons beyond his needs or even ability to absorb, the United States military found it harder to justify additional military aid to Colombia. About midway through 1955, the Departments of State and Defense came into disagreement over the provision of further aid to Colombia. Whereas the Department of State desired to placate Rojas and maintain him as an anti-communist ally, the Department of Defense could find no pragmatic reason for continued support. Defense noted the large quantity of arms that it had already provided to Colombia, and surmised that "At this time there is no Western Hemisphere defense requirement for additional forces from Colombia."<sup>39</sup> Events would soon cause the Department of State to agree.

One particularly demonstrative episode in the declining U.S.-Rojas relationship involves the issue of Rojas' request for napalm bombs. Napalm is an incendiary agent most useful when it is dropped from airplanes against concealed or entrenched infantry. The intense heat of the weapon can penetrate foliage and fortification while asphyxiating those not burned. It causes extreme suffering of the

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<sup>37</sup> Blankinship to Atwood, 868.

<sup>38</sup> Memorandum From Albert H. Gerberich of the Office of South American Affairs to the Director of the Office (Atwood), 20 January 1955, FRUS, 1955-1957, vol. 7, p. 859.

<sup>39</sup> Memorandum From the Director of the Office of South American Affairs (Atwood) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs (Holland), 11 May 55, FRUS, 1955-1957, vol. 7, p. 862-863.

wounded and dying.<sup>40</sup> The United States deployed early forms of napalm against Japanese cities in during the Second World War. After the war, the U.S. Air Force found napalm particularly suited to jungle warfare and later employed the weapon amidst great criticism during the Vietnam War.<sup>41</sup> Various humanitarian and international arms conventions have attempted to abolish the use of napalm in the years since Vietnam.

In October of 1953, even as thousands of guerrillas turned in their weapons, Rojas' government formally requested three thousand napalm bombs.<sup>42</sup> Since the order came under the auspices of the Military Assistance Group, the Colombian Air Force would ostensibly deploy the weapon in defense of Colombia's Inter-American Defense Plan obligations—the Panama Canal.<sup>43</sup> In actuality, napalm has little or no maritime use. Rather, it could prove effective in the heavy terrain occupied by Colombia's remaining insurgents. U.S. officials held up the request, suspecting that Rojas intended to use these new weapons against the guerrillas.

In May of 1955, Ambassador Eduardo Zuleta Angel once again reiterated a request from Colombia's army for, "immediate delivery of 3,000 napalm bombs which the Colombian military authorities wish to use in action against the rebel

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<sup>40</sup> Testimony of Gilbert Dreyfus, "Napalm and its Effects on Human Beings" in Prevent the Crime of Silence: Reports from the Sessions of the International War Crimes Tribunal Founded by Bertrand Russell (Roskilde, Denmark: 1 December 1967), 2-5. ONLINE: <http://www.homeusers.prestel.co.uk/littleton/v1201dre.htm>.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

<sup>42</sup> The Colombian Ambassador to the Secretary of State, 19 October 1953, 721.5-MSP/10-1953, RG 59, NA. printed in Walthour "Laureano Gómez in the Korean War," 207.

<sup>43</sup> Randall, Colombia and the United States, 201-204.

guerrilla forces in Colombia.”<sup>44</sup> In response, Assistant Secretary of State Henry Holland described the “intense emotional opposition” that deployment of such weapons would generate in the United States and other nations. He related the backlash that the United States had suffered as a result of employing these weapons in two previous conflicts.<sup>45</sup> Holland stated that until both sides could review the matter in depth, he would have to suspend the export license for the napalm ordinance. A week later, Ambassador Zuleta cabled a withdrawal of the request for napalm. He insisted that Rojas had never intended to use the napalm against the guerrillas and claimed a subordinate must have made the request without authority.<sup>46</sup> Zuleta was almost certainly engaging in diplomatic niceties. No one at the State Department seriously believed Rojas had ordered the napalm without intending to use it against the guerrillas. Moreover, General Rojas knew very well the ugly realities of napalm and the predictable response of the critics. As a military man, however, he also knew the effectiveness of the weapon.

In Rojas’ authoritarian mind, the benefit far outweighed any costs that might come in the form of international disapproval. Yet, since he depended on the United States for weapons, Rojas did not make the issue of napalm a show-stopping controversy. He needed weapons yet he knew he could not win on the issue of

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<sup>44</sup> May 19 Memorandum, 867.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 867.

<sup>46</sup> Telegram From the Acting Secretary of State to the Embassy in Colombia, 2 June 55, 27 May 1955, FRUS, 1955-1957, vol. 7, p. 869.

napalm. Thus, he relented in order to maintain the appearance of a responsible dictator—one the United States could continue to supply with weapons.

Much of Rojas' ability to defy U.S. wishes came from the strength of the Colombian economy during his early years in office. Historically, Colombia's reliance on coffee as its largest export and the United States as its largest customer significantly weakened its bargaining position vis-à-vis the U.S. government.<sup>47</sup> Despite the tremendous rural violence of the Gómez era, high coffee prices had kept the Colombian economy sound. In 1954, prices collapsed, leading to a generalized depression. Several historians have pointed to the suspicious timing of Rojas' offensive into Tolima, as it coincided with the drop in coffee prices and may have served to draw attention away from a worsening financial situation.<sup>48</sup> Coffee prices recovered temporarily in 1955, renewing Rojas' confidence. High coffee prices emboldened Rojas to thumb his nose at the United States. After recording an episode where the dictator finished a particularly audacious monologue, U.S. Ambassador Philip Bonsal explained bitterly, "And coffee is currently selling in good quantity at 67 cents."<sup>49</sup> As long as he maintained a strong domestic situation, Rojas remained indifferent to the concerns of the United States.

The various struggles over arms show the primacy of military matters in the Rojas government. General Rojas exhibited a willingness to anger the United States,

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<sup>47</sup> Randall, *Colombia and the United States*, 111.

<sup>48</sup> Gonzalo Sánchez and Donny Meertens, *Bandits, Peasants, and Politics: The Case of "La Violencia" in Colombia*, translated by Alan Hynds, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 31.

<sup>49</sup> Telegram From the Ambassador in Colombia (Bonsal) to the Department of State, 3 September 1955, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, vol. 7, p. 881. Hereafter referred to as "Bonsal to DOS."

and even the world if necessary, to accomplish his goal of strengthening the military against his domestic enemies. In a second episode of U.S.-Colombian disagreement, this chapter will demonstrate Rojas' own personal desire to preserve power, often at the expense of his own citizens. Even extreme pressure from the United States could not alter a policy that Rojas saw as beneficial to his own survival as dictator.

The second major priority of U.S. foreign policy in Colombia arose as a direct result of *La Violencia*. In the midst of the disorganized violence in the countryside, Protestant missionaries (many of them U.S. citizens) and their convert communities often suffered at the hands of Colombians. Colombia was and is a nation of over ninety percent professing Catholics. Many Colombians therefore suspected the influence of foreign Protestants. In several instances, rural priests led mobs against minority Protestant communities.<sup>50</sup> Even General Rojas stated publicly that Protestants were linked to communist subversion.<sup>51</sup> Allied with neither of the dominant parties and therefore possessing little protection, Protestant minorities in Colombia suffered disproportionately during the early years of *La Violencia*.

U.S. efforts to force Rojas into protecting the rights of Protestants and Rojas' ability to ignore those demands demonstrate the nature of the U.S. - Colombia relationship. Early in his tenure, Rojas counted the Catholic Church as one of his

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<sup>50</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, by Maurice M. Bernbaum of the Office of South American Affairs, FRUS, 1952-1954, vol.4, p. 776-777.

<sup>51</sup> Memorandum of a Conversation, Department of State, Washington, August 22, 1956, FRUS, 1955-1957, vol. 7, p. 928. Hereafter referred to as "August 22 Memorandum."

strongest allies.<sup>52</sup> In addition, Rojas suspected the Protestants of communist activity, or at least of fomenting popular discontent with his rule. In the early years of *La Violencia*, various Protestant missionary groups appealed the U.S. Congress and the United States quickly came to the defense of the Protestants in Colombia. U.S. ambassadors demanded protections for the missionary communities and leaned heavily on Rojas to guarantee the safety of these expatriates and their native converts.<sup>53</sup> Violence against Protestants declined rapidly after Rojas took power, by mainly because of the pacification of large areas of the country. Even after violence ended, Rojas found other ways to restrict the actions of Protestant missionaries and even the rights of native Colombian congregations. On September 3, 1953, the Rojas government prohibited any Protestant missionaries or congregations from conducting public services anywhere in what he titled "Mission Territory," an area encompassing more than half the total territory of the country.<sup>54</sup> In a move to placate the Catholic Church, or perhaps out of continued suspicion, Rojas sought to minimize the freedom of Protestant elements.<sup>55</sup> In 1954, the U.S. ambassador to Colombia said of his counterpart in Colombia:

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<sup>52</sup> As Rojas attempted to build up his own constituency through government programs for *La Violencia* victims and refugees, his relationship with the Church became increasingly tense and even competitive.

<sup>53</sup> Native populations of Protestants aside from the missionaries' proselytes did, of course, exist. The office of South American affairs mentions a major community at San Andres y Providencia Archipelago "where over 90% of the population is, and always has been, Protestant." Memorandum by Albert H. Gerberich of the Office of South American Affairs to the Assistance Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs (Cabot), *FRUS*, 1952-1954, vol. 4, p. 805. Hereafter referred to as "Gerberich to ASOS."

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 805.

<sup>55</sup> Memorandum of a Conversation, Department of State, Washington, March 28, 1957, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, vol. 7, p. 933. Hereafter referred to as "March 28 Memorandum."

The Ambassador made abundantly clear that he and his Government are thoroughly anti-Protestant in sentiment, and that the Conservative Government is determined to prohibit any deliberate proselytizing and will give no assurance of protection to Protestants who are attempting to convert Catholics to Protestantism.<sup>56</sup>

While the origins of the deep-set Colombian animosity toward Protestants is certainly of historical interest, this episode connects most closely with our study in the area of Rojas' response to U.S. pressures. Rojas' representatives repeatedly reassured the United States that Colombia would do its best to cater to Protestant interests, but made excuses as to why Rojas could not immediately meet U.S. demands. Three years later, in the last year of Rojas' presidency, the State Department noted that "no steps seem to have been taken to work out a solution to the problem of the closed churches in Mission Territory."<sup>57</sup> The Colombian ambassador seemed unimpressed that the U.S. Senate placed a high priority on the issue, and he went so far as to state that the Colombian government, "does not look kindly on the sort of pressure campaign the U.S. Protestants have been carrying on by letters to U.S. Senators and Representatives."<sup>58</sup>

In the end, Deputy Assistant Secretary Roy Rubottom concluded that on the issue of Protestant persecution, "It seems as if every time the Colombian Government takes a step forward it takes two steps backward. We cannot understand why it is so

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<sup>56</sup> Although the ambassador refers to the 1954 Rojas government as the "Conservative Government" Rojas had no party affiliation nor did the cabinet or legislature bear any formal Conservative title. The reason for this discrepancy could not be determined. Only a portion of this memorandum is published in FRUS. Memorandum of a Conversation between Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Woodward and Colombian Ambassador Eduardo Zuleta Angel, FRUS, 1952-1954, vol. 4, p. 807.

<sup>57</sup> March 28 Memorandum, 932.



difficult for the Colombian Government to take a firm, consistent position with respect to this troublesome problem.”<sup>59</sup> Rojas found it “so difficult” to address the issue of Protestant persecution simply because it was not a matter of priority for him. As a minority population with no domestic political connections, the Protestant community had no influence on Rojas’ continued rule. Rojas, in a very pragmatic calculation, chose to suppress “suspicious” elements and satisfy the Catholic Church (a considerable power base for Rojas in his first years in office) rather than please the United States. U.S. efforts foundered on the shores of indifference. Rojas cared little for the issue since it had no influence on his continued power. Rojas’s representatives repeated remarked that violence against Protestants would cease when the government could subdue all the insurgent elements in the country. Colombian could not do this, Rojas maintained, without more U.S. arms...and so the circle went for four years. Much like the Korean Battalion, Protestants in Colombia became a bargaining chip that Rojas could employ to gain further U.S. military aid. In the case of minority Protestant with only irrelevant, overseas defenders, Rojas could risk such indifference. Other Colombians soon would not stand for this sort of attitude.

Rojas’ handling of the national state of siege policy serves as the final example of his selective relationship with the United States. Here, the ascendancy of domestic forces during Rojas’ rule caused him to ignore U.S. wishes. The state of siege, originally declared by President Ospina Pérez on 9 November 1949, met with

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<sup>58</sup> March 28 Memorandum, 932-933.

<sup>59</sup> August 22 Memorandum, 928.

approval by the United States.<sup>60</sup> The *Bogotazo* of a year earlier had raised fears on the north side of the Caribbean that communists might take advantage of the disorder. It did not escape Washington's nervous attention that the archives of the Soviet embassy had been relocated out of Bogotá three weeks prior to Gaitán's assassination. Furthermore, only three days before the outbreak of the *Bogotazo*, the Soviet embassy had burned a large number of documents.<sup>61</sup> The State Department saw red flags on all sides and encouraged whatever measures President Ospina Perez (and later Laureano Gómez) took.

By late 1950, the United States began to express disapproval of the state of siege.<sup>62</sup> By the time Rojas came to office and relative peace reigned, the United States could not longer see any reason for the continued state of siege. Rojas, however, desired to suppress all opposition to his government and he insisted on prohibiting public assemblies, censoring the press, and maintaining military rule. Rojas' actions became more suspicious, as it appeared to be reneging on his promises to restore democratic governance. State Department intelligence reported of Rojas, "He has repeatedly postponed restoration of constitutional governments, seriously curtailed political freedoms, and instituted drastic press and radio censorship."<sup>63</sup> Yet while Rojas knew how to behave to garner U.S. weapons and support, he also knew he could ignore U.S. pressures to change his internal policies.

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<sup>60</sup> Daniel, *Rural Violence*, 39.

<sup>61</sup> Fluharty, *Dance of the Millions*, 102.

<sup>62</sup> Drexler, *Colombia and the United States*, 68.

If Rojas' inaction in matters of Protestantism, civil liberties, or misuse of U.S. arms escaped a harsh U.S. response, his failure to complete the destruction of insurgent communism garnered more serious consequences. Rojas' appearance as a loyal and active ally in fighting communism initially guaranteed U.S. acceptance of his rule. The United States remained loyal to Rojas despite his failure to guarantee civil liberties or return Colombia to democratic rule. After it became obvious in 1954 that General Rojas had not intention of holding fair, scheduled elections, the United States still supported his government. In that year, peace yet reigned in the countryside and the small communist communities remained inactive.<sup>64</sup> By 1955, Rojas appeared far less capable of maintaining peace in the countryside. *La Violencia* had resurfaced. Even worse, a much publicized 1955 offensive against the communists of southern Tolima had failed to wipe out the insurgents.

The United States had long justified its military aid as a means to fight communism. The disarming of the Liberal guerrillas, then, cannot have appeared too impressive to the great power. Instead, the United States became disenchanted with Rojas' inability to quash the enclaves at Viotá.<sup>65</sup> There, real communist subversion did exist, yet Rojas seemed unwilling or unable to destroy it. Rojas value as a fighter of communists, then, appeared less significant than in the original State Department's estimates. U.S. enthusiasm waned as Rojas lost the ability (or will) to maintain

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<sup>63</sup> Memorandum From the Secretary of State's Special Assistant for Intelligence (Armstrong) to the Secretary of State, 5 Apr 55, FRUS, 1955-1957, vol. 7, p. 861. Hereafter referred to as "Armstrong to SOS."

<sup>64</sup> Drexler, Colombia and the United States, 72-73.

<sup>65</sup> Randall, Colombia and the United States, 212-213.

stability and fight the communists.<sup>66</sup> When elements of the two major parties began maneuvering against Rojas in 1956, they did so with at least the tacit support of the United States.<sup>67</sup>

As Rojas's presidency moved into its third year, he began seeking ways to prolong his stay in office. After awkwardly postponing the 1954 elections, Rojas realized the necessity of a popular, grassroots organization to legitimize his government. To repeat a generality of the previous chapter, Rojas did not lean on a single political party for his support. Despite common goals with the Conservatives, he could never depend on them nor did he trust them. Even the Catholic Church remained lukewarm to Rojas' rule. In 1956, Rojas attempted to form the Third Force political party to give him a popular base, and ostensibly, elect him in a later election. He was, after all, a dictator and could not expect to remain legitimate forever without a political party. Rojas courted organized labor and the urban working class, promising stability and prosperity. He also hoped his earlier government programs originally established to combat *La Violencia* would also produce a loyal support base. The *Caja de Crédito Agrario* funded microloans for farmers displaced by the fighting. The *Instituto de Colonización y Inmigración* worked out open government lands to poor settlers. Finally, the *Banco Cafetero y de Exportaciones* attempted to stabilize coffee prices and otherwise support the coffee sector.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Randall, *Colombia and the United States*, 212-213.

<sup>67</sup> Drexler, *Colombia and the United States*, 77-79.

<sup>68</sup> Daniel, *Rural Violence*, 83-84.

On the surface, such a strategy might have succeeded, in view of the fact that Jorge Eliécer Gaitán had gained considerable notoriety by proposing a third alternative to the two major parties. Unfortunately, most of Rojas' reforms to benefit the poor and working classes lacked the funding and competent management necessary to have any widespread effect.<sup>69</sup> Even where the programs garnered results, the traditional regional and political loyalties of the people were not so easily altered to pro-Bogotá, pro-dictator stance. Furthermore, Rojas increased taxation on elites in order to fund his programs. Members of both parties, long accustomed to a privileged status in the country, resented this change and began to plot against Rojas.<sup>70</sup> The general population, fed up with Rojas' other abuses, would soon follow in disapproving of their dictator.

Rojas' Third Force movement never gained the widespread support necessary to challenge seriously the Liberal or Conservative giants. Indeed, Rojas never came close to permitting an election and testing the strength of his democratic support. The United States thought Rojas' Third Force too closely resembled the Peronist movement taking place in Argentina.<sup>71</sup> The reliance on organized labor, government employment, and a dynamic, nationalist leader frightened the State Department.<sup>72</sup> While Rojas never elevated the party to any great power, the tepid response of the United States cannot have boosted his confidence in the movement.

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<sup>69</sup> Daniel, Rural Violence, 83-84.

<sup>70</sup> Drexler, Colombia and the United States, 73-74.

<sup>71</sup> Randall, Colombia and the United States, 212.

<sup>72</sup> National Intelligence Estimate, Probable Developments in Colombia, Washington, April 10, 1956, FRUS, 1955-1957, vol. 7, p. 903-904. Hereafter referred to as "NIE of 1956."

Moreover, the resistance of the Catholic Church to Rojas' catering to radical labor, socialists, and other the Church opposed caused Rojas to blink before staking his future on the Third Force.<sup>73</sup> The failure of Rojas' Third Force stems from domestic, rather than international pressures, however. While the myriad of land and legal reform organizations that Rojas created may have reassured peasants enough to stop them from fighting, his reforms failed to convince many Colombians that Rojas desired true reforms and could promise a better life

In the later years of his rule, Rojas increasingly alienated the Colombian people with a baffling series of abuses of power and generally irresponsible governance. Rojas refused to allow a planned National Constituent Assembly to meet in 1955. His continued attacks on the press earned him disfavor as he ceased censoring *El Tiempo* and simply shut down the newspaper instead, in August of 1955.<sup>74</sup> *Pájaro* hit squads continued to murder enemies of the government.<sup>75</sup> The ever-present counterinsurgency had failed to end the resurgent *Violencia*, and instead oppressed the general population. The 1955 eastern Tolima campaign drew particularly negative responses. The cruel manner in which the army evacuated the civilians had left strong resentment against Rojas. Looting by soldiers and careless aerial bombing by government aircraft had damaged more civilian property than guerrilla targets.<sup>76</sup> Even though the guerrilla threat remained confined to a small area,

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<sup>73</sup> NIE of 1956, 905-906.

<sup>74</sup> Memorandum of a Conversation Between the Secretary of State and President, Washington, August 23, 1955, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, vol. 7, p. 879.

<sup>75</sup> Daniel, *Rural Violence*, 96-97.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 93-94.

Rojas refused to lift the state of siege in any party of the country. Rojas increased funding to the army throughout these years.

Rojas' response to a domestic tragedy exposed his paranoia and lack of concern for his citizens. In August of 1956, army trucks carrying combustible fuels and munitions exploded in central Cali. The terrific blast killed one thousand people and completely destroyed forty city blocks.<sup>77</sup> The best explanation for this explosion, then as well as now, is the carelessness of the army.<sup>78</sup> Rojas, nevertheless, remained convinced that his political enemies (who had just met in Spain to plan his downfall) had sabotaged the trucks. Instead of showing concern for the victims and coordinating a relief effort, Rojas ranted and raved about plots against his regime.<sup>79</sup> He initiated a large and unfounded investigation into the conspiracy, but never disciplined the military or even admitted government fault for the explosion.

Another bizarre incident that demonstrates Rojas' decaying public image and general loss of connection with the population occurred in January of 1956. In that month, Rojas' daughter María Eugenia attended a bullfight in public. The crowd jeered her official party as they took their seats, shouting insults against María and her father. The next week, Rojas employed approximately fifty local men to mix into the audience. These thugs began demanding that the crowd cheer "Long Live

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<sup>77</sup> Daniel, Rural Violence, 99.

<sup>78</sup> Sabotage remains a possible explanation, but not on the grand conspiratorial scale that Rojas claimed. More importantly, the Colombian public doubted the sincerity of Rojas' later accusations.

<sup>79</sup> Memorandum from Albert H. Gerberich of the Office of South American Affairs to the Director of the Office (Bernbaum), FRUS, 1955-1957, vol. 7, p. 926. Hereafter referred to as "Gerberich to Bernbaum."

President Rojas!” When some refused, the plainclothes men attacked any dissenters with clubs and knives. A general riot ensued, with Rojas’ hired men injuring dozens of spectators. An undetermined number of civilians died of their injuries. Rojas’ blatant revenge for the insult against his daughter became known as the Bull Ring Massacre.<sup>80</sup>

Final, the personal corruption of Rojas and his family alienated the closest of his supporters. Rojas Pinilla, in an attempt to strengthen his personal control, appointed close political friends to generalships—ahead of officers who had come up through the ranks. This action finally began to push even the military away from Rojas.<sup>81</sup> Meanwhile, his friends and family grew fabulously wealthy through nepotism and graft.<sup>82</sup> Colombia’s first and last military dictatorship would soon draw to a close.

The United States attempted to restrain Rojas’ excesses in the last months of his reign, yet met with the dictator’s continued international indifference and domestic paranoia. In a meeting with the Colombian president, U.S. Ambassador Bonsal suggested that censorship of the press might be hurting Rojas’ image. Rojas responded that *El Tiempo* had been relaying coded messages to guerrillas, and that the newspaper’s owner funded guerrilla operations. Furthermore, Rojas maintained that

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<sup>80</sup> Daniel, *Rural Violence*, 97-99.

<sup>81</sup> Latin American militaries, Colombia’s included, are extremely conscious of seniority in the assignment of rank and position to officers. Rojas’ actions in this regard were highly offensive to a professional and heretofore nonpolitical Colombian officer corps. *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>82</sup> Memorandum from the Acting Assistance Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs (Rubottom) to the Acting Secretary of State, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, vol. 7, p. 934. Hereafter referred to as “Rubottom to ASOS.”



shutting down the paper had been a popular move that the Colombian people supported. Ambassador Bonsal believed none of these statements and instead attributed Rojas' attitude to the loyalty of the military and the high price of coffee.<sup>83</sup> The State Department concluded that although he had lost much domestic support, Rojas remained in control. "His ability to complete his term in office...will depend increasingly on the loyalty of the armed forces."<sup>84</sup>

One year later, Rojas' position had deteriorated even further. By September of 1956, falling coffee prices had wreaked havoc on the Colombian economy. Rojas could no longer maintain any shred of popularity as the coffee boom drew to an end.<sup>85</sup> To make matters worse, foreign exchange difficulties cut into wages and domestic buying power.<sup>86</sup> Rumors of a coup circulated as the country.<sup>87</sup> On the eve of Rojas' resignation, the Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs concluded, "Through his ineptness, the President has successively alienated one important element after another since he seized office in 1953: political leaders, business men, labor, clergy, and now the Embassy reports evidence of discontent within the Army itself."<sup>88</sup>

Discontent in the army finally brought down the Rojas regime. An alliance of Liberal and Conservative politicians took advantage of growing popular

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<sup>83</sup> Bonsal to DOS, 881.

<sup>84</sup> Armstrong to SOS, 860.

<sup>85</sup> Sánchez, *Bandits, Peasants, and Politics*, 20.

<sup>86</sup> Telegram from the Ambassador in Colombia (Bonsal) to the Department of State, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, vol. 7, p. 929.

<sup>87</sup> Gerberich to Bernbaum, 926.

<sup>88</sup> Rubottom to ASOS, 934.

dissatisfaction to approach Rojas through some of his military officers (whom they had won over). Advised by his leading generals that the end was inevitable, Rojas resigned on 10 May 1957. A military junta, shortly replaced by a coalition Liberal-Conservative government, peacefully took control of the country.<sup>89</sup> Despite his many abuses, Rojas had the grace to depart office as bloodlessly as he had entered.

Like several Latin American dictators of the period, Rojas maintained a close military relationship with the United States. He gained this status through his commitment to fighting communism and his promise to restore stability to a dangerously volatile country. Unlike Trujillo or Somoza, however, Rojas did not depend upon U.S. support for the continuance of his rule. As a result, he resisted and even defied U.S. direction. His strong initial popularity and solid control over the military gave him a greater degree of freedom from U.S. wishes. A generally professional army, and not one created by the United States or hired to support a new dictator, also gave him a more reliably, independent base.<sup>90</sup> His status as an accomplished officer, and not a puppet of the United States, granted him three years of loyalty from that military.

The U.S. Department of State largely failed to control or influence the Rojas regime due to an improper understanding of Rojas' priorities. U.S. domestic opinion, international approval, and even long term economic prospects made little difference to General Rojas. As a paranoid leader heavily reliant on the military, he regarded as

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<sup>89</sup> Drexler, Colombia and the United States, 77-79.

<sup>90</sup> NIE of 1956, 903-904.

vital only those policies which strengthened his military power base and controlled his political opponents. Rojas successfully resisted all U.S. measures that threatened these priorities. The only area in which Rojas changed his policy with regard to the United States was in the area that most affected his internal power in Colombia. He relented on his request for napalm because he could not afford to appear overeager to employ U.S. weapons on domestic political enemies. On the other hand, Rojas paid only lip service to U.S. efforts to protect Protestants or restore democracy in Colombia. In some cases, he directly refused and even ridiculed such requests. Since he saw the continuance of the policies in question as beneficial to his continued power in Colombia, he saw no reason to accede to U.S. demands. Furthermore, since U.S. policy never linked the supply of military arms to Rojas' on these domestic issues was never linked to issues of arms, he had no reason to fear any other forms of U.S. response. The State Department failed to interpret General Rojas' priorities and over three years of effort made no headway on some of the United State's most important concerns in Colombia.

Unlike the State Department's failure to understand Rojas' motivations, Rojas knew exactly what factors drove U.S. policy. Rojas directly linked the sale of U.S. arms to the continued presence of Colombian troops in the Korean War. He knew the importance of the UN forces maintaining an internationalist appearance, and he knew that his position as the only participating Latin American nations gave him special leverage with the United States. As a result, he secured promises of U.S. weapons in the critical months before the conclusion of the Korean War. Had he waited until the

war ended and Colombian participation became vestigial, he would have lost the opportunity offered by the presence of the Korea Battalion. Had he failed to link his demands with a threat to withdraw, the United States could likewise have ignored or delayed his request indefinitely. Additionally, Rojas understood that U.S. policy (domestic and international) justified arms transfers as a means of containing communist expansion. To increase his chances of receiving U.S. arms, he craftily positioned himself as the Colombian bulwark against communism. By repeatedly characterizing the insurgents as communists intent on spreading Marxist revolution, Rojas ensured that the United States would supply weapons to a regime that it would otherwise condemn for authoritarian abuses.

For all the maneuvering between Rojas and the United States, in the end domestic forces, and not international pressures, played the central role during the Rojas years. In fact, the only international force that had any significant effect on Rojas' policies was the price of coffee. It also appears that as the United States could not conceivably have prevented Rojas' rise to power, nor could any amount of U.S. support prolong him in power past the point where the country, and especially the two parties' elites, tired of him. The loss of popular support, the continued resistance of the guerrillas, the machinations of the late Liberal-Conservative coalition, and the eventual alienation of the military dwarfed any role played by the United States. Most historians do credit the United States with supplying to Rojas arms, and capital,

and additional legitimacy.<sup>91</sup> That the United States played a decisive or even marginal role in Rojas' rise, rule, and fall, however, appears questionable. The intensity of *La Violencia* years guaranteed that the powerful, relentless actors within Colombia pursued their own agendas with a passion that no foreign power could significantly redirect.

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<sup>91</sup> Sánchez, "The Violence, An Interpretative Synthesis," 88.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

Leading Colombian Liberal intellectual Alberto Lleras Restrepo has written that the limited avenues for political expression (i.e., only the two elitist political parties) led to an increasing militarization of Colombian culture before and during *La Violencia*. He argues that violence ceased to symbolize any legitimate political concern, in the eyes of the state. Long since accustomed to violent protest, the state reduced insurgencies to a problem of public order and hence applied the most logical solution—repression.<sup>1</sup> According to this type of analysis, the presidential efforts of General Rojas Pinilla repressed political expression and gave the population no choice but to resort to arms in order to have a voice. This thesis has illustrated, however, that unified political expression and class identification do not adequately explain the violence of 1948-1957.

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<sup>1</sup> Luis Alberto Lleras Restrepo, "The Crisis of the Current Political Regime and its Possible Outcomes," in *Violence in Colombia The Contemporary Crisis in Historical Perspective* edited by Charles Bergquist, Ricardo Peñaranda, and Gonzalo Sánchez, (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1992), 285.

On the other side, more conservative authors have claimed that disorder and lawlessness actually incites random or paranoid violence, legitimizes otherwise unreasonable causes, and lowers the cost of illegal activity. From this point of view, the restoration of order is paramount in establishing a peaceful society.

Unfortunately, the methods necessary to restore order often create their own problems. The case of Rojas also demonstrates the dangers inherent in granting one man the power to eliminate extra-legal actors, and then trusting him not to use that power for his own ends.

Ultimately, Rojas chose both the preceding approaches of repression and redress of grievances, but carried neither one to its necessary conclusion. Rojas did not use his power to stamp out the remaining bandits and guerrillas of *La Violencia*, nor did he fully commit to correcting the injustices of the past and working to build an impartial and just government. His combined program of amnesty (however poorly administered) and repression (however poorly prosecuted) did achieve the first break in Colombia's cycle of violence. This success alone represents a great achievement during the *Violencia* years. Before he could remedy the shortcomings of either half of the program, however, Rojas' personal lust for power and intolerance of opposition led the general down a far more myopic path than one of national restoration.

Amnesty functioned as both a restorative process and also an offensive action against those guerrillas who refused it. First and foremost, the 1953 amnesty restored, however temporarily, public confidence in the government and armed

forces. It also disarmed the majority of the guerrillas (although many insurgents returned to arms after suffering paramilitary attacks). Yet the amnesty had a more long term effect on the remaining insurgents. Colombian historian Gonzalo Sánchez has remarked that the minority of guerrillas who declined the amnesty ultimately undermined their popular legitimacy.<sup>2</sup> In 1953, with a strong economy and a popular leader, there appeared to be little valid reason for remaining in arms against the government. Even after the outbreak of new violence in 1955, the guerrillas had lost their national voice. Neither the cause of the guerrillas nor the scourge of *La Violencia* would again penetrate the majority of Colombia's terrain, much less the elitist halls of Bogotá. After a later amnesty offered by the National Front government in 1958, ruthless government repression against the remaining guerrillas elicited scarcely a remark from the domestic media and population.<sup>3</sup>

Rojas never implemented a broad offensive after his amnesty. Whether his government might have ended guerrilla resistance through such a policy remains indeterminate. What is clearer is that Rojas' unique position as a leader without the support of either of Colombia's two parties placed him in a vulnerable situation.

Rojas made the most natural choice and turned to the military. Even as his actions

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<sup>2</sup> Gonzalo Sánchez and Donny Meertens, *Bandits, Peasants, and Politics: The Case of "La Violencia" in Colombia*, translated by Alan Hynds, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 21. Another means of robbing the guerrillas of legitimacy involves the public lexicon. National Liberal leaders were quick to refer to the guerrillas as "bandits" once the elites' interests diverged from those of the insurgents. In 2002, Colombian government officials have begun calling FARC members "terrorists" for reasons that should be all too obvious at this point in history. See Sánchez, *Bandits, Peasants, and Politics*, 19, and for a recent example: Juan Ferrero, "Colombia Says Talks Have Failed, And Rebels Get Ultimatum," *El Tiempo*, January 10, 2002. ONLINE: <http://eltiempo.terra.com.co/10-01-2002/>.



alienated his erstwhile supporters, Rojas leaned yet more heavily on his control of the armed forces. He drew extensively from his relationship with the United States in order to reinforce this control. Yet, the United States never exerted a significant impact upon Rojas government outside of the limited goals he had set out to pursue. Far more conclusive was the impact of the temporarily disenfranchised Conservative and Liberal Parties. The Declaration of Sitges, the document signed in Spain wherein Colombian representatives of the Liberal and Conservative parties agreed to a coalition government that would replace Rojas, brought together Laureano Gómez and Liberal leader Alberto Lleras Camargo.<sup>4</sup> After the tremendous partisan bitterness of the early *Violencia* years, leaders of the two parties “restored” Colombia’s political situation with an arrangement that split the benefit of leadership between them—even if it did not effect any more agency or participation for the Colombian people. Colombia’s political culture would not experience until 1991 the significant, constitutional reforms that Gaitán and so many guerrillas had desired. In that year, a new constitution accommodated minority parties (even parties of ex-guerrillas), set up term limits for the president, and improved the independence of the justice system.

As for the guerrillas themselves, most could thank the Rojas government for ending the culture of violence that caused many of them to flee their homes in the beginning. If they became victims of later reprisals by paramilitaries, they have the monster of *La Violencia* as much as Rojas to blame. Historians and anthropologists

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<sup>3</sup> Sánchez, *Bandits, Peasants, and Politics*, 22.

have expended tremendous effort to identify social or political unity within the guerrilla movement. It is tempting to identify the 1950s guerrilla movement with Che Guevara's *focos* of the 1960s, bent on revolution inspired by a guerrilla vanguard.<sup>5</sup> However, the most correct summary is probably the one that confesses the many nuances of the Colombian history of the period: "Guerrilla resistance emerged as a large-scale combination of various political expressions and of different levels of class consciousness, which historically have varied not only from one region to another but within each region." Sánchez's statement is typical of the most neutral analyses of *La Violencia*. While land reformers, disaffected peasants, and proponents of increased democracy all fought in *La Violencia*, such issues can hardly be defined as neither the causes nor the goals for insurgent struggle.<sup>6</sup>

A frequent trend throughout this study is increasing government reliance on the military. Presidents Ospina, Gómez, and Urdaneta turned to the military first as a friend while in need, then as a necessary ally. President Rojas placed the country under total military rule. With such a bitterly divided society, the military became the only institution that the government could rely upon to carry out its wishes. For the most part, the military achieved the goals that the various presidents assigned to it. As an institution, however, the Colombian military bent and nearly cracked under the pressure of so much responsibility. The Gómez and Rojas eras severely damaged its reputation with the public at large; a reputation which the army had to regain slowly

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<sup>4</sup> Sánchez, *Bandits, Peasants, and Politics*, 20.

<sup>5</sup> Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 1.

during the National Front era. Increasing the role of the military had grave consequences for the government's reputation as well. It identified the government with brute force instead of consensus rule. It led to inevitable abuses of power, property, and life which, with or without justification, the population believed to be sanctioned by the political leadership. Nonetheless, the alternative is often to permit extralegal violence by civilian vigilantes on an even broader scale. This exact approach proved largely successful in suppressing guerrilla cells during the National Front era, but the long term effect of paramilitary violence is hard to quantify--and may be enormous, given Colombia's legacy of organized death squads and violent crime stemming from this period.

Rojas lost a great deal of internal as well as international support due to his inability to end *La Violencia*. Rojas' initial offer of amnesty had bolstered his legitimacy and national respect for the army, upon whom his fate rested. No dictatorial government can long be viewed as legitimate, however. One that fails even to restore order defaults on its most basic mandate. Prolonged civil strife in Colombia demonstrated the Rojas administration's lack of ability to govern. Furthermore, the buildup of weapons in the hands of criminals broke down the monopoly on the use of force that is traditionally enjoyed by the government. Civilian squads of vigilantes might have contained banditry in the short term, but the arbitrary and partisan nature of vigilante justice damaged the long-term prospects for

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<sup>6</sup> Sánchez, *Bandits, Peasants, and Politics*, 18.

peace. Furthermore, the prolonged presence of guerrilla strongholds bred further armed movements against the government.

Rojas' amnesty, albeit tarnished by later events, remains the single greatest success of his administration. By itself, however, the amnesty could not bring an end to the cycle of violence. Amnesties, rather than restoring government legitimacy, can damage that legitimacy in the long term. When President Ospina Pérez offered the first amnesty in 1948, he established the precedent that crimes against the state would go unpunished. In addition, he demonstrated that the state did not have the means or resolve to bring those criminals to justice. Even if Colombia could have eliminated the local level causes for violence, the loss of legitimacy meant that nearly any group might take up arms to forward a narrow personal agenda. This phenomenon is demonstrated by the large presence of communist guerrillas long after the government ceased official repression. The impunity with which *pájaros* acted also shows the lack of government control. Excessive offers of amnesty actually lower the price for violence and human rights abuses. This fact damages the deterrent value of the rule of law. Not only do guerrillas believe they will escape unpunished, but vigilante groups also escape punishment. Out of necessity, Rojas offered amnesty not just for those on the political left, but also for *pájaros* and members of the armed forces who committed excesses in their suppression of guerrillas.<sup>7</sup> Such a policy, extended over time, led to impunity on the part of all actors.

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<sup>7</sup> Rojas did, after all, rely on the army to support his government. He could hardly expect to punish the army and his allies while pardoning his political enemies. *El Tiempo*, September 1, 1953.

In addition to the obstacles he faced, Rojas made several mistakes in dealing with the problem of rural violence. He acquiesced to the policy of allowing civilian allies to fight alongside the army. The bad blood between rival civilian factions only increased through *pájaro* participation. Rojas also failed to replace corrupt or cruel leaders who stained the image of the army and prevented reconciliation. His increasing dependence on military support for his regime precluded his ability to regulate the military and punish abuses by the leadership. Finally, Rojas failed to eliminate those vestiges of *La Violencia* that did not respond to amnesties. Whether from fear of failure or desire to preserve his usefulness, Rojas never brought the full weight of the Colombian Army against the communist strongholds that continued to promote insurgencies and erode the legitimacy of the government.<sup>8</sup> For this reason, he would turn to unsuccessful military options until yet another government (the National Front) with yet another popular mandate would have to finish the job.

Gonzalo Sánchez has remarked that during *La Violencia*, Colombia experienced a loss of "social hobbesianism," the socially constructed assumption by

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<sup>8</sup> Retired Colombian General Valencia Tovar echoes similar sentiments on eliminating all vestiges of guerrilla elements, but also insists on the necessity for economic and social rebuilding after the completion of military counterinsurgency operations. This thesis's author agrees and regrets that the current work could not include more analysis of civic action programs and economic development in troubled areas. General Tovar, who is one of Colombia's most respected experts on military counterinsurgency, states that Colombia lost control of the insurgency problem because 1) The army failed to realize that the new, post amnesty guerrilla groups were not simple bandits, but rather organizationally strong and ideologically committed movements. 2) The state failed to rebuild economic and social structures in the areas disrupted by *La Violencia*; this lack of restoration led to a resumption of violence in those areas. Gonzalo Sánchez, "Problems of Violence, Prospects for Peace," in *Violence in Colombia, 1999-2000: Waging War and Negotiating Peace*, edited by Charles Bergquist, Ricardo Peñaranda, and Gonzalo Sánchez (Wilmington: SR Books, 2001), 16.

which where we expect others to act well.<sup>9</sup> After a society has lost the normative inhibition against committing violent acts, the restoration of peaceful coexistence can be elusive, even impossible. Even if a government can eliminate the causes that impel citizens to take up arms against each other, the damage to trust between fellow citizens and between the people and their government may be too deep to mend. Furthermore, after a certain cathartic level of violence is achieved, no amount of additional threats or punishments can restore the same level of deterrence. These are only a few of the difficulties that faced Rojas half a century ago and that face Colombia today. Even as this thesis goes to print, the nation of Colombia is confronting the possible collapse of another peace process and gearing itself for further civil strife. Can continued attempts at reconciliation, on any terms, can convince an embattled, growing minority (such as the guerrillas of today) to begin to “act well?” Or does a society only heal when the brute fist of the law crushes opposition and restores authority. Perhaps an especially strong and legitimate government could even combine the two approaches, as General Rojas attempted to do. In the meantime, these questions remain a challenge that this generation of

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<sup>9</sup> Sánchez, “Problems of Violence, Prospects for Peace,” 14. Social Hobbesianism is best illustrated with a common urban phenomenon such as stoplights. Citizens expect other drivers to stop at red lights. Were a large percentage of the driving population to cease respecting red lights, the city government would almost certainly lack the resources to punish every infraction. At the same time, individual citizens would be far more likely to run red lights, since the government could no longer guarantee safe passage during green lights, nor could the government punish them for running the red light. Hence, the society has lost social Hobbesianism and become far more dangerous and lawless. Regaining respect for red lights under these circumstances would prove exceedingly difficult. Even

Colombians, or maybe the next, will have to work out for itself.

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very serious penalties for running red lights would have little effect on overall behavior in the short to middle term.

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